

Ye
— *are my* —
Witnesses

David J. Engelsma
Herman Hanko

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Covenant Protestant Reformed Church
83 Clarence Street
Ballymena, N. Ireland BT43 5DR
Phone: (028) 25 891851
Website: www.cprc.co.uk
E-mail: bookstore@cprc.co.uk

Crete Protestant Reformed Church
1777 E. Richton Road
Crete, IL 60417 USA
Website: www.prccrete.org
E-mail: evangelism@prccrete.org

Reformed Witness Committee
PO Box 181
Doon, IA 51235 USA
Website: www.reformedwitness.org
E-mail: reformedwitness@gmail.com

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Foreword

The Bible is a book of witness. It is God's written testimony to the world and it records the witness of His people to His glory, from the corporate witness of the worshipping church (Gen. 4:26) and the (largely rejected) preaching of Enoch (Jude 14-15) and Noah (II Pet. 2:5) before the flood, all the way to the book of Revelation penned by the Apostle John, who was exiled to Patmos "for the word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ" (Rev. 1:9).

This witness is rich and varied, coming from God's people of various backgrounds and ages, with both life and lip, to both believers and unbelievers, and highlighting different aspects of the character and salvation of the God of the covenant.

What a witness of faithfulness and contentment was Joseph who was sold into slavery by his brothers, slandered by his master's adulterous wife and imprisoned for a crime he did not commit (Gen. 37; 39-41)! Moses and Aaron testified courageously to hard-hearted Pharaoh and his court (Ex. 5-12). The faith and works of the harlot Rahab in Jericho are a great witness (Josh. 2; Heb. 11:31; James 2:25-26).

Who can forget Ruth the Moabitess' moving plea to her mother-in-law, Naomi?

Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God (Ruth 1:16).

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Listen to the Israelites at the temple with their baskets of first-fruits, confessing with joy and gratitude that Jehovah redeemed them and gave them the promised land (Deut. 26:1-11). Remember the little Jewish girl's word to Naaman the Syrian's wife of God's power to heal through His prophet Elisha (II Kings 5:3-4). The four young men from Judah were a fine witness to Nebuchadnezzar and his pagan court by their faithfulness to God's law and diligence in studying (Dan. 1).

If anything, the theme of witnessing is even stronger in the New Testament. Think even of the earliest history contained in its pages: the Virgin Mary's joyful witness to Elisabeth (Luke 1:46-56), the praise uttered by the formerly dumb Zacharias (vv. 67-79), the shepherds who spread abroad the things they had seen and heard on that marvellous night in Bethlehem (2:8-20) and the words of the "wise men from the east" to King Herod (Matt. 2:1-2).

John 1 repeatedly describes John the Baptist as a "witness" who "bare record" of Jesus Christ (vv. 7-8, 15, 19-20, 32-34; cf. vv. 26-27, 29-31, 36-37, 40). During His public ministry, the Lord's followers witnessed of Him, such as, the man born blind, with quick-witted responses to His interrogators (9:24-34); Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector, by generous giving and restitution (Luke 19:8); the children in the temple, with praise to the Son of David (Matt. 21:15-16); and the penitent thief, with sharp rebukes of his fellow criminal and a beautiful request for inclusion in Christ's kingdom (Luke 23:40-42).

The Lord Jesus, "the light of the world" (John 8:12; 9:5), came to earth to "bear witness unto the truth" (18:37), through his preaching, parables and miracles, as well as His conversations with individuals, such as Nicodemus at night (ch. 3) and the Samaritan woman at the well (ch. 4). It all climaxed with His atonement on the cross and the "good confession" that He "witnessed" "before Pontius Pilate" (I Tim. 6:13; cf. John 18:33-38). The women at Christ's tomb testified of His amazing resurrection on the third day (Matt. 28:1-10).

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Especially after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2), the apostles were witnesses of the risen Lord (1:22; 2:32; 3:15; 4:33; 5:32), as Christ had earlier promised (John 15:26-27; Acts 1:8). Acts is a book of the witness of the early church by apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, elders, deacons and believers; faithful Jews and Gentiles; young and old—often reviled and persecuted but always victorious in Jesus Christ.

Sometimes, the testimony to the Lord Jesus was made in legal settings, especially by Paul in his various trials before religious and civil rulers (chs. 22-26). This even took him to Rome itself, for he appealed to Caesar (25:11, 21, 25; 26:32; 28:19).

Not only do the holy angels witness to saints on many important occasions in the Bible, but also the sufferings of the apostles (and even of the church) are “a spectacle” to angels (1 Cor. 4:9).

Thus we are surrounded by a great “cloud of witnesses” (Heb. 12:1), consisting not just of Old Testament believers (e.g., ch. 11) but also of children of God in the New Testament Scriptures and even of Christians in the two millennia of the post-apostolic church.

Like many other parts of the world, the British Isles has a noble history of witnessing, including Saint Patrick in fifth-century Ireland; John Wycliffe, the fourteenth-century English pre-Reformer; Bishop Robert Ferrar, martyred in Carmarthen, Wales, in 1555; and the great sixteenth-century Scottish Reformer, John Knox.

Add to this the godly pastors, profound theologians, faithful missionaries and vibrant Christians whom God has raised up in these islands to testify of His rich saving truth at home and abroad, and summarized in the gospel promise:

That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord
Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath

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raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation (Rom. 10:9-10).

All of this stands in sharp contrast to the development of “the mystery of iniquity,” which has been working for two thousand years (II Thess. 2:7) and which will culminate in the Man of Sin and his big lie, for he “opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God” (v. 4; cf. Rev. 13:6). Yet, most will follow him and perish in God’s just judgment of them for their not receiving “the love of the truth” (II Thess. 2:9-12; cf. Rev. 13:3-8).

The British Reformed Fellowship (BRF) seeks to increase and strengthen godly witnesses and true witnessing in the British Isles and further afield by the grace of the Holy Spirit. To this end, the BRF organized its twelfth biennial Family Conference in Lorne House, by the north coast of County Down in N. Ireland with the theme of “Ye Are My Witnesses” (28 July – 4 August, 2012). Now the BRF has published this excellent material in the book you are reading. The cover photo is of Blackhead Lighthouse on the east coast of County Antrim, to which a number of Lorne House conferees walked during one of the day trips.

Part 1 consists of the six main lectures by Profs. Herman Hanko and David Engelsma, dealing with the calling, content and manner of our witness, both of the official witness of the church and the personal witness of the believer by word and life. Since the two Sunday sermons by our two main speakers developed aspects of our great theme, they are included in Part 2.

Part 3, “Mission Work: Message and Methods” by Rev. Martyn McGeown, gives a concrete and practical application of the biblical teaching on witnessing from one man in one missionary work, the Limerick Reformed Fellowship. This originally constituted the special lecture at the 2012 BRF Family Conference and

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is included especially for the instruction and encouragement of others involved in mission work or small churches.

Ye Are My Witnesses is the fifth BRF book co-authored by Profs. Engelsma and Hanko, the others being *Keeping God's Covenant* (2006), *The Five Points of Calvinism* (2008), *The Work of the Holy Spirit* (2010) and *The Reformed Worldview* (2012).¹

I hope you read this latest BRF book prayerfully, and that it stirs your soul to witness more faithfully. May the truth of God's Word, set forth here, resonate in all our hearts: "Ye are my witnesses" (Isa. 43:10)!

Rev. Angus Stewart
BRF Chairman

¹ All five of these books, plus many others by Profs. Hanko and Engelsma, as well as other fine Reformed literature and box sets of CDs and DVDs, are available from the Covenant Protestant Reformed Church Bookstore (www.cprf.co.uk/bookstore). The main distributors of *Ye Are My Witnesses* in North America are listed opposite the Contents page. Most of the works of Profs. Engelsma and Hanko are published by, and available from, the Reformed Free Publishing Association (RFPA) in Jenison, Michigan, USA (www.rfpa.org).

The Divine Calling to Witness

Herman Hanko

Let all the nations be gathered together, and let the people be assembled: who among them can declare this, and shew us former things? let them bring forth their witnesses, that they may be justified: or let them hear, and say, It is truth. Ye are my witnesses, saith the LORD, and my servant whom I have chosen: that ye may know and believe me, and understand that I am he: before me there was no God formed, neither shall there be after me. I, even I, am the LORD; and beside me there is no saviour (Isa. 43:9-11).

Introduction

The charge has repeatedly been made that the Protestant Reformed Churches, in which denomination I am a minister of the gospel, cannot engage in evangelism and are not able to witness to those who are outside their own sheltered walls. The ability to witness to God and His Christ is destroyed, so they say, by the failure of these churches to believe in and teach the gracious and well-meant gospel offer.

The argument goes something like this: if one is unable to proclaim that God loves all men and desires to save everyone, he cannot be a genuine instrument in God's hands to call others to faith in Christ. The logic of this argument escapes me—unless one, along with his firm belief in a well-meant and gracious gospel offer to every one head for head, believes that the final decision either for or against salvation rests in man's free choice. Why cannot a member of the church of Christ witness,

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when he believes that all salvation is of God and that the gospel he loves is the power of God unto salvation to all who believe?

The Protestant Reformed Churches insist that their members be faithful witnesses in this world of sin and darkness. It is the burden of the chapters of this book, which were adapted from speeches given at a British Reformed Fellowship Family Conference, that witnessing is the emphatic calling of the church and of every child of God who is a member of the church.

In the emphasis that we place on witnessing is an implied criticism of modern evangelical ideas and methods of witnessing. It is our firm conviction that many theories and ideas of witnessing have no support in Scripture. It can be said without danger of contradiction that false ideas and methods of witnessing arise out of a failure to understand what the church of Christ is and what is its calling in the world.

It is indeed time that the record be set straight: the Protestant Reformed Churches give urgency to witnessing. These churches are not shackled in their calling to witness by their denial of the well-meant offer; they are, quite the contrary, given genuine incentive to this calling. Let their witnessing and everyone's witnessing be in harmony with the Scriptures.

Scripture's Call to Witness

People who do not believe that witnessing is part of the Christian's calling have always made themselves heard in the church. Scripture, however, is unmistakably clear on the importance of witnessing. Not only is this calling laid on the saints in the new dispensation, but it was strongly emphasized in the centuries when God's purpose of salvation was realized only in the nation of Israel.

One of the most striking evidences of the need for the Old Testament saints to witness is found in Isaiah 43:9-11, quoted at the beginning of this chapter.

In the early part of Isaiah 43, God reminds the people of Judah

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of what He has done for them, what He still does and what He will do in the future:

When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee. For I am the LORD thy God, the Holy One of Israel, thy Saviour: I gave Egypt for thy ransom, Ethiopia and Seba for thee. Since thou wast precious in my sight, thou hast been honourable, and I have loved thee: therefore will I give men for thee, and people for thy life (vv. 2-4).

They are God's special people, blessed among all the nations of the earth, and for whom He will move the creation itself out of its place to secure their salvation from sin and death.

In anticipation of a time when God would gather His church from among the Gentiles, Jehovah also reminds Judah of why they are urged to be His witnesses.

I will say to the north, Give up; and to the south, Keep not back: bring my sons from far, and my daughters from the ends of the earth; Even every one that is called by my name: for I have created him for my glory, I have formed him; yea, I have made him (vv. 6-7).

When the specific command comes to Judah to be God's witnesses, the scene is dramatic. He commands all the nations of the earth to assemble. Having assembled them, He challenges these nations to produce their witnesses who will justify their idolatry. Let these witnesses say on behalf of the idolaters: "It is truth" (v. 9). But this, of course, proves impossible. Such witnesses cannot be found.

And so God comes with His Word to Judah:

Ye are my witnesses, saith the LORD, and my servant whom I have chosen: that ye may know and believe

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me, and understand that I am he: before me there was no God formed, neither shall there be after me. I, even I, am the LORD; and beside me there is no saviour (vv. 10-11).

A Call to Us

Isaiah 43 was spoken through the prophet to Judah prior to Judah's captivity, but it reaches ahead to the time when Judah would go into captivity and later return to the land of Canaan. God would preserve unto Himself a remnant according to the election of grace. That election of grace includes, as the text makes clear, the New Testament church, gathered from the Gentiles. The Old Testament church, Judah, was only part of the one church of Christ. Even after Christ finished His work on earth and ascended into heaven, God's church is still His church, but it is now gathered largely from the Gentiles. The nations are called to produce their witnesses to prove that their gods can save them and make them blessed. They cannot do that, for there is no blessedness to be found among them. The church is God's witness to these nations of the earth of what He has done for them, and thus they give testimony that Jehovah is the only God.

The verses which follow the statement that we are God's witnesses are filled with some amazing truths. God extols His own name by insisting that He is the only one who can save from sin and death. His purposes are eternal and He will surely do what He has said He will do. No one can frustrate His purpose (vv. 12-13).

He is the only Redeemer of the church (v. 14). He delivers from Babylon His own people and He will save the church from the nations. He is the Holy One who is the Creator of His church and the church's King (v. 15). He will do anything at all in His creation to save those who are His own heritage (vv. 16-17, 19). The church is God's great creation: "This people have I formed for myself; they shall shew forth my praise" (v. 21). Showing forth God's praise is the sum and substance of their witnessing.

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In a certain sense, God compels them to be witnesses of Him, for the power by which they witness is inherent in the salvation He has graciously given them. Among all the nations of the earth, God chose His people. Was it because they were holier than other nations? Was it because they were ideally suited to be His people? Was it because they earned the right to be numbered with His saints? The very opposite is true. God makes this very clear:

For thou art an holy people unto the LORD thy God: the LORD thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto himself, above all people that are upon the face of the earth. The LORD did not set his love upon you, nor choose you, because ye were more in number than any people; for ye were the fewest of all people: But because the LORD loved you, and because he would keep the oath which he had sworn unto your fathers, hath the LORD brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you out of the house of bondmen, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt (Deut. 7:6-8).

The Power of Our Witness

We must learn two more things from Isaiah 43.

First, we must learn that not only the calling but also the power to witness comes from our salvation of which God alone is the Author. He has made us His people and formed us for His own purpose. His purpose is to glorify Himself among the nations. He has called, sovereignly and efficaciously, His people into existence throughout all ages of history to witness of Him. But they are able to do that great work only by the Spirit of Christ within their hearts.

Second, in a general way, we are told what the content of our witness must be. We are to summon all the nations as it were; that is, we are to go into all nations because God gathers His

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church from all nations. We are to witness that the gods they serve are not worthy of their worship.

We are to say to the nations, "You claim that the gods you serve are true gods. Do you want to witness to these gods? Molech, Baal, Ashtoreth? Or more modern idols: riches, power, science, medicine, houses and lands? Let these gods speak. What have they done for you? Your gods have brought you pleasure? Where is the pleasure of which you boast? Where is it when you are dying of cancer? Where is it to be found in the graveyard? All your wealth has brought you only worry, grief and black despair, because you cannot pack your coffin with your wealth, nor slam the door of the hospital shut with your pleasure. Can modern science save you? What has it done to erase the slavery of drugs, drunkenness, ruined families? What has it done to avert tsunamis, earthquakes and tornados? God blows a little and all your 'marvellous' accomplishments lie in ruin. Where have modern medicine and miracle drugs brought you? You say, 'It has prolonged life.' Has it not filled rest homes, hospitals and nursing homes with aged and doddering people waiting to die? Have your gods stopped war? Have they erased poverty? Have they made the world a better place to live? Your witnesses are silent and dumb. They have done nothing."

But, says God, "Ye are *my* witnesses." Speak of the mighty works of Jehovah. Point to Him as the only God in all the earth: without beginning and without end; the Creator of all; the sovereign King, who has redeemed His church from sin through His own Son and thus made His church everlastingly free from sorrow, from illness, from trouble. Point to Him to whom belong all praise and glory. Let that be your witness.

Are there dangers in witnessing in a wicked world that hates the Lord? God is aware of that. Listen to His speech in Isaiah 43:

Fear not: for I am with thee (v. 5).

Thus saith the LORD, which maketh a way in the sea,
and a path in the mighty waters; Which bringeth

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forth the chariot and horse, the army and the power; they shall lie down together, they shall not rise: they are extinct, they are quenched as tow (vv. 16-17).

But now thus saith the LORD that created thee, O Jacob, and he that formed thee, O Israel, Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine (v. 1).

What Is a Witness?

Two distinct ideas belong to the concept of a witness.

The first idea is that one who witnesses sees with his own eyes and experiences the event of which he must testify. This is the meaning of the term in Luke 1:2: "Even as they delivered them unto us, which from the beginning were eyewitnesses, and ministers of the word." Luke in his gospel narrative is to write of things of which many were witnesses. That is, many themselves saw and heard the things of which he tells in the book he wrote. Peter claims that he, James and John were "eyewitnesses of his [i.e., Christ's] majesty" on the Mount of Transfiguration (II Pet. 1:16).

The second use of the term, closely related to the first, is to testify of what one has seen. This is the meaning of the term in courts of law in which witnesses are permitted to testify only what they themselves have seen or experienced. Anything of which they were not themselves witnesses they are not permitted to bring into the court because it is "hearsay." This meaning of "witness" implies the first idea. One can witness only to that which he has seen or heard.

The difficulty is that we are God's witnesses. But, quite obviously, we have not "seen" God, for He is the invisible One. Nor have we seen Christ, in whom God is revealed. Peter, in I Peter 1:8, says of Christ, "Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory."

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How then can we be witnesses of God and of His Christ?

Peter tells us that, although we do not see Christ, we believe in Him. The object of our faith is always the Holy Scriptures, and faith in the Scriptures is also faith in Christ. Peter pursues this idea in II Peter 1. After speaking of the fact that he himself, along with James and John, were eyewitness of Christ's majesty, he says, "We have also a more sure word of prophecy" (v. 19). That more sure word of prophecy is the Holy Scriptures. They are more sure than our testimony of what we have seen. We never see anything completely and perfectly. We are prone to see only what we want to see. Even if we try our best to be reliable, we never can be completely accurate. Witnesses differ in their testimony, even though they have seen the very same thing. The Scriptures, Peter says, are more sure than our own eyewitness report.

The reason why the Scriptures are more reliable is this:

... no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost (vv. 20-21).

The Scriptures are the living testimony of Christ Himself. When the Spirit of Christ, who Himself inspired the Bible, testifies within our hearts that the Scriptures are the Word of God, we not only learn from their pages some things about what God has done through Christ, but we come to know Christ personally as our Saviour and Redeemer. We are witnesses in the sense that we "see" Christ Himself, that is, we see Him with the eyes of faith. He speaks in His Word and by the operation of His Spirit so that He witnesses of God. We hear the witness of God Himself, a far more sure witness than even the testimony of an eyewitness. But it is a word that comes from God through Christ who is the Word become flesh, in whom alone is all our salvation.

Thus, by the same Spirit who works faith in our hearts and brings us the knowledge of Christ and of the salvation God

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freely gives to us through Him, we have a certain testimony to make, one which no man can gainsay. To deny in any respect the absolute infallibility of Scripture is to leave us without anything about which to witness.

“Ye are my witnesses.” That means we are in a position to testify as witnesses of all the things of God and of the great work of salvation He has worked in us by faith in Jesus Christ.

The Content of Our Witness

People have many mistaken notions about the content of one’s witness. Because the motivation for witnessing is often only “to bring people to Christ” or, worse, “to persuade people to accept Christ as their personal Saviour,” the general opinion among Christians is that we must tell all with whom we come into contact that God loves them, that God wants them to be saved and that God will be pleased if they accept Christ as their Saviour.

This is the testimony of a false witness. Surely, we do not want to be false witnesses!

In the broad sense of the word, the content of our witness is the sacred Scriptures and all that is taught in them. The content of our witness is not, however, what we ourselves have discovered in the Bible, but what the church has taught and learned from the Scriptures over two millennia. It is the precious heritage of the truth embodied in our creeds.

More particularly, the content of our witness is the work of God in Jesus Christ to save His church from sin and death, and to bring it into covenant fellowship with Himself. The Scriptures are the portrait of Jesus Christ. This portrait of Christ includes in it everything the Scriptures teach from Genesis 1:1 through the last verse of Revelation 22. All the diverse writings penned over a period of two thousand years, written by different men whom God used to write these Scriptures, including history, poetry, wisdom literature, prophecies and letters from apostles to different churches, are all parts of one portrait of Christ revealing the Triune God in all His fullness.

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Narrowing down the content of our witness more, we are called to testify of the great work of salvation which God has wrought through Jesus Christ. We are to witness to the glory of our Christ through whom we are saved. We are not to point to ourselves, but we are to point to our Saviour as the all-sufficient Lord in whom alone we can be saved. We are to witness to God's great wrath upon those who do not have faith in Christ, for the punishment of our great God is everlasting hell.

More particularly yet, the content of our witnessing is the great glory of God, His glory in His own divine Jesus Christ Being and His glory in all the works of His hands. Isaiah reminds us, "This people have I formed for myself; they shall shew forth my praise" (43:21). Not the solution to social problems; not dreams of utopia here in the world; not learned essays on philosophical matters; not commentaries on cures for the ills of our time; not the proclamation of a God who loves everyone—none of these can be the content of true witnessing.

God is God. We are witnesses to praise Him and give glory to Him to whom all praise belongs. We are such because through our witness God is pleased to gather His elect church. We are, by grace alone, members of that church. We can surely take Paul's words on our lips:

O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counsellor? Or who hath first given to him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again? For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen (Rom. 11:33-36).

Finally, witnessing is telling all that God has done for us, poor and helpless sinners, made beautiful saints more glorious than the angels. And we are to witness that those who believe in Christ will know the same glory that is ours, while those who mock and reject Him will perish in hell.

The Inevitability of Witnessing

While Scripture undoubtedly admonishes us to be faithful witnesses in the world, the fact remains that there is a certain inevitability about the witness of the church. Isaiah 43:10 does not call us to be faithful witnesses, but simply states the fact: "Ye are my witnesses."

Jesus also emphasizes this fact, although He also appends an admonition. In Matthew 5:14-16, we read,

Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.

These words of our Lord are found in the Sermon on the Mount, which some have rightly called "The Constitution of the Kingdom of Heaven." The point Jesus is making is clear. The world is in darkness, total darkness, where no one can find his way. It is the darkness of the lie that obliterates the light of the truth. It is the darkness of depravity that swallows up the light of holiness. Into that dark world, the Lord God, through Christ, has caused the light of His truth and holiness to shine. He has done so by gathering and preserving a church. That church shines with the light of the truth that it proclaims and with the brilliance of holiness given it by the perfect sacrifice of Christ. "Ye are the light of the world."

The very existence of the church in the world from the beginning to the end of time makes witnessing inevitable. The continuous presence of the church is a witness of God's love for, and faithfulness to, His church. The devil and his hosts, along with the world which cooperates wholeheartedly with Satan, are determined to destroy the church. The world hates the light and is blinded by its brilliance. But the church exists in every age. Its light cannot be quenched. God not only gathers, but also defends and preserves His church. The deeper and darker

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becomes the world, the brighter shines the light of the church proclaiming God's Word as the only truth and standing in a world of moral corruption as a holy institution. "I believe an holy, catholic church!"

A Necessary Calling

An admonition is appended, and so it should be. Our own personal sins dim the light of God's truth and holiness. We sinfully hide our light under a bushel. We do so out of fear of being persecuted and out of fear of suffering for Christ's sake. We have in our natures a strong desire for the pleasures of the dark and sinful world. And so the admonition comes to us with urgency: "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven" (v. 16).

Two other ideas are embedded in this verse that ought briefly to be mentioned. About these things, later chapters will have much to say.

The first is that, because the church is the light that shines from heaven in the impenetrable darkness of sin, the individual believer can himself be a light with his own witness only when he is in living fellowship with the church. If he separates himself from the church in which the truth is found, he loses the light that should shine in and through him.

Christ is the Sun of Righteousness (Mal. 4:2) who reveals all the truth of God and who in His spotless holiness made atonement for our sins. The church is like the moon which has no light in itself, but receives all its light from the sun. If the moon hides from the sun, it is cold and dark and invisible in the blackness of space.

But just as the moon in all its phases from new moon to full moon so the church shines brighter at some times than at others. We are a part of the church. Thus we receive the light of our own witness only from the Sun of Righteousness and so we can be the light of the world only in living union with the church.

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The second point, which I briefly mention, is that God's purpose is accomplished through the witness of the people of God. Others see our good works and glorify our Father in heaven.

Some have interpreted this to refer to the theodicy, that great day of our Lord's return on the clouds of heaven, when every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of the Father (Phil. 2:10-11). I prefer rather the interpretation that God uses the witness of His people to bring others to salvation. It is true that there is no salvation apart from the church, but the witness of God's people is used by God to lead those ordained unto eternal life to saving faith in Jesus Christ and thus into the fellowship of the church where they are nourished and kept until the end.

In the way of the salvation of all the elect, God Himself is glorified by His church. "This people have I formed for myself; they shall shew forth my praise" (Isa. 43:21). Let God alone be honoured also through our witness.

The Content of Our Witness

David J. Engelsma

And [Jesus] said unto them, Thus it is written, and thus it behoved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day: And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. And ye are witnesses of these things (Luke 24:46-48).

Introduction

As little as God leaves it up to us to decide whether we will witness, so little does He leave it up to us to determine what we will witness—the content of our witness, whether the message of our speech or the nature of our witnessing life. The first chapter of this book has shown that God calls us to be witnesses. He decides that we must witness. God also decides the content of our witness. It is required in a witness that he or she be faithful. He or she must be faithful not only in the activity of witnessing, but also with regard to the content of the witness.

What I do in this chapter is not to convince the reader of what I think is important concerning what we say in witnessing. Rather, I remind us all of what God requires us to say in our witness.

There is good reason for God's determining the content of the witness of His church as a body and of His believing people individually. For one thing, the effect of our witness or the usefulness of our witness depends, under the blessing of the Spirit, upon the content of our witness. The content is all-important.

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Second, mixed in among believers and their children in the visible church are false teachers and hypocrites, ready and eager to corrupt the witness of the church. Without a standard of the content of the witness, without a divinely inspired content, our witness would soon be corrupted or at least challenged by the false teachers and false brothers.

Third, the believing people of God, including ministers, missionaries and professors of theology, are sinfully weak humans, inclined by nature to give false witness, prone to weaken and adulterate the true witness that the church must give and also susceptible to the temptation to create our own testimony, as also to decline to say what ought to be said.

Repeatedly, Jehovah mandated and even warned the prophets, “Tell Israel what I have instructed you to say—nothing more, nothing less, nothing different.” This holds for the true church and her witness. It holds also for what each member of the church says to his or her neighbour.

The Importance of the Content

Before we consider what the content of the Christian witness is, we ought to be impressed with the importance of the right content of our witnessing or, as some would say, evangelizing. The fact is that the importance of the content of witnessing is minimized or even ignored completely. Many who emphasize the worth and necessity of witnessing do not even think about the content. All that is really important is that someone opens his or her mouth and says something—something religious, of course, something about Jesus, if possible. But anything is satisfactory. Anything will do. Witness for many consists only of the activity of witnessing. It does not really include the content of the witness.

Many others today are tolerant of almost everything that is said in witness, both by the churches and by individual Christians, even though the message—the content—is false and sometimes foolish. All that is important is that the churches and persons

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are witnessing. The attitude of many is that the content, the message, of the witness does not matter and does not constitute an essential aspect of witnessing.

The thinking that the content of witnessing is unimportant is wrong. The content is essential to the witnessing that God commands of both church and member. Rather than have the wrong content, one could better keep his mouth shut. If a church or a person has erroneous content and speaks it, this church or person has not witnessed, but has engaged in false witness and is accounted a false witness by God.

The importance of the content of Christian witnessing is evident from the basic function of a witness in a courtroom. The important thing is that such a witness bears witness to the truth. The content of his witnessing is all-important. The rightful or wrongful sentencing of the defendant, or the rightful or wrongful freeing of the defendant, depends on the content of the witness's witnessing in court. Who says or thinks, "What the witness actually says is not important, only that he or she witnesses"?

Wrong content marks the witness as a false witness—as evil a human as there is—and makes the testimony false—as dangerous and hurtful an activity as is conceivable.

The Bible holds up for censure a "false witness," that is, one who witnesses but with wrong, bad content. The ninth commandment of the law forbids bearing false witness (against our neighbour).

False Witnessing

But Scripture condemns and forbids witnessing falsely more generally. "Thou shalt not raise a false report: put not thine hand with the wicked to be an unrighteous witness" (Ex. 23:1) "He that speaketh truth sheweth forth righteousness: but a false witness deceit" (Prov. 12:17).

Especially does Scripture condemn those whose witness con-

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cerning God and salvation (which is the subject of this book) is bad and false.

For the idols have spoken vanity, and the diviners have seen a lie, and have told false dreams; they comfort in vain: therefore they went their way as a flock, they were troubled, because there was no shepherd (Zech. 10:2).

Behold, I am against them that prophesy false dreams, saith the LORD, and do tell them, and cause my people to err by their lies, and by their lightness; yet I sent them not, nor commanded them: therefore they shall not profit this people at all, saith the LORD (Jer. 23:32).

So is the content part of the witnessing that you may conclude that one who witnesses falsehood has not been sent and called by God.

Similarly, the New Testament warns of and condemns men who claim to witness to God, Christ and salvation, but whose content is false and destructive. Peter warns against “false prophets ... [and] false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies” (II Pet. 2:1). II Timothy 3:13 likewise condemns religious witnessing, the content of which is false: “But evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived.”

The mind of God in the Bible is not that all that matters is that one is busy in the activity of witnessing regardless of the content. On the contrary, the worth and value of witnessing are exactly the content—what is said.

The explanation of the importance of the content of witnessing is to be found in God’s purpose with our witnessing. If the purpose is merely that we feel good about ourselves, the content of our witness is not important. It does not matter then what we said to people; all that matters is that we witnessed to someone today. If the purpose is to get converts to our church, the con-

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tent of our witness is of little importance. What we said is not the important thing; all that matters is that people joined the church and that our numbers increased.

But these are not God's purpose with our witness. God has a purpose, indeed several of them. These purposes make the content of our witness important, indeed essential. God's purpose is that our witness glorify Him, whether people heed our witness or reject it. This demands that the content be the truth. His purpose is that our witness honour Jesus Christ who is the Lord of all by His bodily resurrection and who is the only Saviour on account of His lifelong obedience to the will of His Father, culminating in His atoning death. This demands that the content be the truth. His purpose is that the witness serve to lead and win elect humans to Christ for salvation and into true, instituted churches where this salvation is bestowed and enjoyed. This demands that the content be the truth. God's purpose is also that other humans, reprobated by God in His eternal counsel, be exposed as the rebellious sinners they are and be hardened in their unbelief (1 Pet. 2:7-8). This demands that the content be the truth.

None of these purposes of God is realized by witnessing that has the lie and falsehood as its content, no matter how aggressive, zealous and attractive the activity of witnessing may be. The Bible warns of proselytizing (witnessing) that is full of enthusiasm and even conducted with much personal sacrifice that is not only worthless, but that also accomplishes an evil effect: it makes the proselytes—the converts of such witnessing—worse spiritually than they were before. In Matthew 23:15, Jesus condemned the witnessing of the scribes and Pharisees of His day: "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, ye make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves."

Today, one of the most active religious groups in all the world in witnessing is the Mormon cult. The content of the witness of this cult defames the one, true God; dishonours, indeed denies, Jesus Christ, the only Saviour and sovereign Lord; and renders

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the converts more the children of hell by believing and practising the religion of Mormonism than those converts to Mormonism were before their conversion.

Also nominally Christian churches and professing Christians witness falsely today because the content is not true, is not orthodox. The witnessing of the theologically "liberal" or "modernist" churches and individuals is false and, therefore, worthless and destructive: "All the gods of all the religions are really the same; let us unite to form one worldwide religion, so that we can work for earthly peace and prosperity, putting an end to war, famine and the oppression of women and homosexuals; this is the salvation that the Bible teaches; and in all this saving work of mankind, Jesus is our great example, and nothing more."

The witnessing of the Roman Catholic Church is false and, therefore, worthless and destructive, despite being impressive in its scope, in its frenetic activity and in its appeal: "The pope is the vicar of Jesus Christ, so that connection with him is the way of salvation; the beginning of salvation is guaranteed by taking the sacraments from a priest; but for the continuation of salvation, and the possible perfection of it, this depends on you and on your performance of good works."

The witnessing of the Arminian churches and evangelists is false and, therefore, worthless and destructive. Arminian witnessing may be the most prevalent, powerful witnessing of all in the West: "God loves and desires to save every human; Christ died for every human; now, He offers salvation to you, but this salvation depends on you yourself—you must accept the offer by your free will; and even after you accept the offer so as to allow Jesus to enter your heart, your salvation continues to depend on you—it is possible that you may change your mind, fall away from Jesus Christ and go lost forever."

The witnessing of antinomian churches and individuals is false and, therefore, worthless and destructive. These believe and teach that grace permits unholy living, so that belief of the gos-

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pel is licence to sin. This witness is extremely popular today. It takes various forms. "Join our church, because there is no requirement for a disciplined, holy life; there is no discipline by elders; the grace of God in our church allows you to live a wicked, lawless, disorderly, worldly life." Such is the witness of the mega-churches and of the "emergent churches." "Jesus is okay with it, that you divorced your wife and abandoned your children, and in your unbridled lust married another woman; He welcomes you to the Lord's Supper in our congregation; He forgives you even though you do not repent with a repentance that breaks with the sin, confesses to your abandoned wife and children and turns to God with a delight now to live in good works." This is the witness of permitted, unpunished, gross lawlessness concerning the Christian life of multitudes of nominally evangelical churches in North America, Europe and many other parts of the world in the twenty-first century.

Because of the popularity of this witness, it is beneficial to remind ourselves of the true witness of the church of Jesus Christ and of genuine Christians concerning this very lawlessness in family life: "But if any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel" (I Tim. 5:8).

There is also the false witnessing of churches and individuals who, for various reasons, including their commitment to the doctrine of a "common grace" of God supposedly bestowed upon ungodly men and women, adapt their witness to the thinking and practices of the ungodly world. Concerning origins, they witness that the universe came to be as it is by evolution over billions of years, as Darwin taught, thus denying Genesis 1-3. Concerning many sins, they excuse them as sicknesses or even deny that they are sicknesses, because they have bought into Freud's psychology. Concerning headship in marriage and office in the church, they deny the headship of the husband and open the offices to women, because they have caved in to the feminism of the world of the ungodly. Concerning sodomy and lesbianism, they witness that these perversions are lawful desires and behaviour, approving sodomite and lesbian con-

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nections as “marriage.” Their witness includes the condemnation of churches that reject homosexual relations as “unloving and unchristian.”

All of these churches and their members witness aggressively by all kinds of means. They make their witness in the name of the God of Christianity and on behalf of Jesus Christ.

But their witnessing is not praiseworthy. It does not serve God’s purposes with the witnessing of His people.

The fault of the witness—its sin—is the content.

What then is the content of genuine Christian witness? What must the content be?

God decides the content.

Because this is so important, I will deliberately let God Himself speak the answer to the question, as He plainly does in the Bible, often in immediate connection with the call to His people to witness.

The Glory of God

First, the content of all right witnessing is, and must be, the truth about God Himself: that He is God; that He is God alone; and that He is glorious, in all His perfections and works, especially His work of the salvation of guilty, depraved sinners from their sin and misery.

The content of our Christian witness is not man and his happiness, but God and His glory.

This content of our witness is expressed in the passage of Scripture that is the basis of this book, as it was the basis of the conference that produced this book, Isaiah 43:10-13:

Ye are my witnesses, saith the LORD, and my servant whom I have chosen: that ye may know and believe me, and understand that I am he: before me there

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was no God formed, neither shall there be after me. I, even I, am the LORD; and beside me there is no saviour. I have declared, and have saved, and I have shewed, when there was no strange god among you: therefore ye are my witnesses, saith the LORD, that I am God. Yea, before the day was I am he; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand: I will work, and who shall let it?

“My witnesses” in Isaiah 43 does not mean only that the witnesses are sent out by the Lord, but it means also that they witness of the Lord. What we are to say of Him, He Himself prescribes: “before me there was no God formed, neither shall there be after me” (v. 10). He is God, and He is God alone. This prescribed content of our witness points out that there is, and must be, a negative aspect of witness: all other gods are false, are nothings, including the Allah of Islam; all worship of a god other than the God of Christianity, the God revealed in the Bible, is idolatry—both foolish and sinful.

Our witness, therefore, will not be popular!

We will be criticized for our witness!

Our witness will draw opposition and persecution!

In Isaiah 43, God prescribes that we witness to Him as the Saviour of lost, wretched, sinful humans—the only Saviour: “I, even I, am the LORD; and beside me there is no saviour” (v. 11). Verse 12 adds, “I have declared, and have saved.” God is Saviour by virtue of His covenant: this is the significance of His name, Lord or Jehovah.

We are also to witness that God is sovereign, especially in the work of salvation, but also in all His works. This is simply the implication of His being God and God alone. But God expresses His sovereignty as part of the content of our witness in verse 13: “there is none that can deliver out of my hand: I will work, and who shall let [i.e., frustrate] it?”

Jesus as Lord

Second, the content of our witness is, and must be, Jesus Christ—the full truth of Jesus Christ. Scripture explicitly identifies the truth of Jesus Christ as the content of Christian witness in I Corinthians 12:3. Addressing the squabbling concerning spiritual gifts by members of the church at Corinth, the apostle begins with this: “Wherefore I give you to understand, that no man speaking by the Spirit of God calleth Jesus accursed: and that no man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost.”

The operation of the Spirit in all believers moving them to call Jesus the Lord is the Spirit’s chief work regarding spiritual gifts and activities. In comparison with this work of the Spirit, the other operations of the Spirit are inferior, even though the effects of the other operations may be more spectacular and showy, for example, the first-century gifts of tongues and healings.

I Corinthians 12:3 defines the content of our witness: “Jesus is the Lord.” Much is included in the simple confession and testimony. Jesus is risen from the dead and enthroned at the right hand of God in heaven. As Lord, He now governs all things, as God’s servant. He has all authority and power over all things, including death and the grave. Especially does this lordship characterize His work of salvation. He is not a helpless beggar in saving humans, dependent on their will and works. The content of witness, therefore, is the *Canons of Dordt* and their doctrines of sovereign grace, popularly known as “The Five Points of Calvinism.” They could better be known as “The Five Points of the Lordship of Jesus in Salvation.”

Jesus is Lord and can be Lord, only because He is God the Son in human flesh. The content of our witness is Jesus’ divine Person, the incarnation and, therefore, necessarily, the truth of the Trinity. It becomes evident that the content of our witness is not a “gospel on a thumbnail.”

Important aspects of Jesus’ work of salvation are implied by the testimony that “Jesus is Lord.” His death accomplished the re-

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demption of all for whom He died. God would not have raised Jesus as Lord, had His death not fully satisfied for the sins of all in whose stead He suffered. One who says, "Jesus is Lord," confidently trusts the cross alone for pardon and righteousness.

A second aspect of Jesus' work of salvation implied by the witness to Him as Lord is that He governs our life, so that we do His will, that is, obey the law of Jesus' Father. One who lives in rebellion against Jesus' precepts, which are the law of God, does not, and cannot, honestly say, "Jesus is Lord." Fact is, Satan is the lord of the impenitently disobedient.

As is implied in the basic confession "Jesus is Lord," Scripture elsewhere makes plain that witnessing to Jesus the Christ has as its content Jesus' saving work. Jesus Himself specified that the content of the witness of His church and of the members individually must be His saving work. He specified this in Luke 24:46-48:

... thus it behoved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day: And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. And ye are witnesses of these things.

The content of the witness is "these things," namely, the things mentioned in verses 46 and 47: Christ's suffering, as necessitated by the justice of God regarding the guilt of the sins of the elect church from all nations; the bodily resurrection; and this ministry of Jesus for the remission of sins in the way of repentance. The main benefit of salvation is forgiveness of sins. The only way to have it is by repenting—a heartfelt sorrow over sin, a confession of sin and a breaking with sin.

Repentance is part of the content of witnessing. This too means that our witness will meet with anger and opposition. Our witness humbles sinners. Nothing is more offensive, more distasteful and more painful to sinful men and women than repenting of their sinfulness and particular sins.

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Everything belonging to the Person and work of Jesus Christ is properly the content of our witnessing, as the occasion of the witnessing and the person to whom we witness require.

Not only the New Testament Scripture, but also, as Jesus pointed out in Luke 24:45, the Old Testament Scripture is properly the content of our witness to Jesus Christ, for the Old Testament foretold Him, His suffering and His resurrection. According to Luke 24:45, Jesus opened the understanding of His disciples so that they might understand the Old Testament Scriptures as prophecy of Him and of His saving work.

When our witness is the Old Testament, we must be sure that we make clear how the Old Testament passage or truth relates to Jesus Christ. For example, we must not merely argue with unbelief (even among professing Christians!) about the historicity of Adam. But we must witness to the historical reality of Adam as a type or figure of Christ, as Romans 5:14 describes Adam. Then we point out to those professing Christians, who are influenced by higher criticism of the Bible and by evolutionary theory to deny Adam, that a denial of Adam is, in fact, a denial of Jesus Christ.

Hope

Third, the content of our witness is, and must be, the hope and joy that we ourselves have by believing in Jesus Christ and experiencing His salvation. Here, of course, I have in mind the classic text in the New Testament on the witness of each believer, I Peter 3:15, which exhorts us to “be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear.”

The content of our witness concerns our hope and consists of the reason for the hope. Our hope is our confident, sure expectation of great good in the future—great good at death, when this life ends; great good after death; great good in the final judgment that is impending for all humans when Christ comes again at the end; and great good everlastingly.

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Fundamentally, this hope is the resurrection—the resurrection of the body in the day of Christ and resurrection of the soul into heaven at the moment of death, with the everlasting bliss and glory that both of these phases of resurrection will give.

But our hope includes as well the confident expectation of good in this life, no matter how gloomy the natural prospects. Our hope is not the foolish supposition that there will be no troubles. But it is the certainty that the God who one day will raise our soul and then our body will also care for us in this life, providing our needs and causing even the evils He sends to us in this vale of tears to work our true, spiritual and eternal good (Rom. 8:28; Ps. 23:6).

To this hope belongs our knowledge that our life has meaning, purpose and worth. This is exactly what the hopeless ungodly lack. Not only does the ungodly man or woman face death with its horrors and an awful God of judgment on the other side of death, but his or her earthly life is always exposed to many, dreadful evils, whether some natural calamity or family distress or poverty or cancer. And their earthly life is meaningless and purposeless. As one French existentialist profanely put it, for the ungodly and unbelieving, “Life is one damn thing after another, and death is the thing after that.” And he omitted the worst thing of all: divine judgment.

In contrast, the life of the believer has meaning and purpose: he or she lives for God—the highest, noblest, most worthy purpose of life. He or she serves Christ and His dear bride, the church. All his or her good works are noted and will be rewarded.

The reason for our hope is the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, that is, Jesus Christ Himself. Since we receive the benefit of hope by faith in Jesus Christ, faith is also part of the reason of our hope and, therefore, part of the content of our witness.

These are not three different contents of witnessing, which we testify on three separate outings: God, Jesus Christ and our hope. But they are one, three-fold content. The content of wit-

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ness is God as our Saviour in His Son in our flesh, Jesus Christ, giving hope to guilty, depraved, dying sinners. Or, to state it differently, the content is our hope, given by God through Jesus Christ as the benefit of salvation.

The Law of God

To these three elements of true, Christian witness, Jesus Himself adds a fourth: the law of God. "Teaching them," He ordered, in the Great Commission, "to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:20). Much supposedly Christian witnessing, in both missions and personal evangelism, inexcusably ignores this element of the Great Commission. Their witness stops with "getting the person saved." How he or she lives thereafter is no concern of such witnessing.

Some professing Christians become so bold as to deny that the Christian gospel includes any demands or commands at all. Thus they contradict Jesus, who, in giving the Great Commission, which obviously consists of calling His church to proclaim the gospel, includes the mandate that the church demand that the converts "observe all things whatsoever I [i.e., Jesus] have commanded you." The gospel of Jesus includes commands. They are not commands obedience to which justifies or grounds salvation or that constitute conditions upon which salvation depends. They are commands that constitute the Christian life of thankfulness for gracious salvation and that point out the way of salvation for the saved child of God.

Christianity is not antinomian. The way of salvation is not lawless. Genuine Christian witness does not leave the convert to his own devices with regard to his new life. It does not leave him uninstructed concerning the thankful life and walk of the redeemed and converted disciple of Jesus Christ. It does not convey to him the message that he may live as he pleases. It does not deny the saving work of sanctification or the role of the commandments of the law of God in sanctification.

The witness of antinomianism is false witness—a very popular

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false witness in our day with those who delight in living after the flesh.

Negative Witness

Concerning this content, we witness it, always accompanied by a criticism of the errors, heresies and forms of disobedience that oppose the content of our witness.

When we say, "God is God alone," we oppose the contrary teachings that the gods of the other religions are God or that all the gods are legitimate manifestations of the true God.

When we say, "Jesus is Lord," we oppose the lie that Jesus remains dead in a grave in Palestine; the lie that Mohammed is a prophet; the lie that man himself is Lord; and the lie that in salvation the sinner is sovereign, that is, Lord, so that Jesus depends on the sinner's will or acceptance or works or performance of conditions in the saving of the sinner.

When we say, "We have hope, and our hope is the resurrection, so that our life has meaning and purpose," we oppose all naturalism and materialism; liberal theology that denies the resurrection; and the sheer this-worldliness that finds the end of man in eating, drinking and making merry (I Cor. 15:32).

Many professing Christians object to this critical, negative, antithetical aspect of the content of witness, as though this is detrimental to witnessing and even unchristian. But this negative aspect was prominent in the witness of the prophets, in the witness of Jesus Himself and in the witness of the apostles.

Whoever refuses to give such a negative witness, exposing and condemning errors, shows that he or she is no true witness at all. A true witness is zealous on behalf of the truth of God, of Jesus and of the Christian hope, as also of the righteousness of the law of God. Indeed, a true witness is commissioned by God to expose and refute false witness, witness that denies or corrupts the truth about Himself, His Son and His salvation.

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Argument is implied in the charge of I Peter 3:15. “Answer” in the Greek original of the text is “*apology*.” “Apology” refers to a reasoned, argumentative defence of the Christian gospel and hope against disbelief or challenge.

In view of the wonderful, awesome nature of the content of our witness—God! Jesus as Lord! Hope!—and in view of the importance of the content, it should be plain that every witness must have qualifications.

The Qualifications for Witnessing

The popular notion that witnessing is as easy as falling off a log and that every new convert to Christianity can and should begin witnessing the next day after he has “accepted Christ,” as they say, is mistaken.

Scripture requires qualifications for witnessing. Isaiah 43:10-13 stipulates qualifications: “my servant whom I have chosen;” one who knows and believes God, and understands “that I am he;” one to whom God has “declared ... and ... shewed” the content of the witness.

In Luke 24, before Jesus appointed the disciples as witnesses, He “opened ... their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures” (v. 45). Immediately, He promised the Spirit to empower and enable them to be witnesses (v. 49).

In I Peter 3:15, the call to believers to give an answer concerning their hope is preceded by “sanctify the Lord God in your hearts.” Only thus is one ready to give an answer.

The qualifications for witnessing include that God Himself calls and mandates us to witness. As is demonstrated later in this book, this is true both of the church and of the individual believer.

A qualification is that God gives us His Spirit to enable us to give a true witness. The Spirit gives us sound and thorough knowledge of Scripture. The Spirit gives us the experience, by

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faith, of the salvation of Jesus Christ. The Spirit gives us zeal on behalf of God which motivates us to witness (“sanctify the Lord God in your hearts”).

The Spirit gives us the boldness and courage to witness in the face of hatred of our message and of us ourselves, which may well result in ridicule, injury and even death. Jesus expressly warned that this would be the result of the witness of His church: “They shall put you out of the synagogues: yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service” (John 16:2). This time comes soon for true churches and genuine Christians in North America and in Europe at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Witness that the God and Father of Jesus Christ, revealed in the Bible and proclaimed by the Christian church, is the only God and that all other gods are idols so that the worship of them is damnable idolatry; witness that Jesus is the only Saviour and Lord, so that there is salvation only by faith in Him; witness that divorce for reasons other than the fornication of one’s mate is forbidden and that all remarriage after divorce is adultery (Matt. 5:32); witness that sodomy and lesbianism are perversity so that sodomite and lesbian relations can never be “holy marriage” (Rom. 1:26-27), and a church or a Christian is liable to be driven out of contemporary synagogues—the Christian religious establishment—and killed. As the apostates and modern heathens thus react to our witness, they suppose that they do God a service.

Witnessing calls for courage. Courage comes from the indwelling Spirit of the truth. And, in the context of the warning of suffering because of our witness, Jesus promised the qualifying Spirit that “if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you” (John 16:7).

Since God bestows the Spirit of Jesus Christ in the true, local congregation, by the ministry of the Word and by the sacraments, the qualifications for witnessing are received by membership in the local congregation. There, we are instructed in all

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the Scriptures: the content of our witness. There, we continually receive the rich salvation of Jesus Christ. There, we are stirred up to be zealous for God.

From the true instituted church, we go out every Sunday evening, called to witness throughout the week.

To this church, we lead those whom we win to Christ by our witness.

By the witness of the apostles' doctrine and by the witness of the worship and life of the members in the early apostolic church, "the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved" (Acts 2:47). We may expect Him to do the same today.

The Official Witness of the Church

Herman Hanko

But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth (I Tim. 3:15).

Introduction

It may come as something of a surprise that one of the six chapters of this book is devoted to the official witness of the church. Usually, when we think of witnessing, we speak in terms of personal witnessing and the calling of the individual to be a witness. Most books on witnessing speak of this rather individualistic idea of witnessing.

Nevertheless, the church plays a crucial role in all witnessing. I would even go so far as to say that without the witnessing of the church in its official capacity to preach the gospel no individual witnessing is possible.

The church in her calling to witness in its preaching the gospel is the source of the spiritual power of all witnessing. At the same time, the welfare of the church, that is, the gathering of all the elect body of Christ, is the goal of witnessing—subordinate, of course, to the highest goal of the glory of God.

What the Church Is

When I speak of the church in this chapter, I am referring to the

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church institute, that is, to the church as it manifests itself in the world through local congregations.

The Scriptures sometimes speak of the church as an organism. When the Bible speaks of the organism, it refers to the body of Christ, chosen by God eternally, given to Christ as the Head of the church, redeemed in His blood, called into existence by the efficacious call of Christ and destined to live with Him forever in heaven. That church is so united to Christ that it receives all its life and blessedness from Him. It is united to Christ by faith which is a living bond between Christ and His people. It is by virtue of its union with Christ that it becomes the covenant bride of Christ and of God.

However, in great wisdom, Christ has ordained that His church, which He purchased with His blood, should be manifested in the world. It is the earthly manifestation of the body of Christ in a visible form in the local congregation of which I now speak. That church is the gathering of believers and their seed in the corporate worship of God on the Lord's Day. Christ is the author of the work of making His body visible in the world. He gathers believers together; He forms them into congregations that are to be found throughout the world. He gives the church the reason for its existence; He defines its calling. This manifestation in the world of the body of Christ is called the church institute.

The church is called "institute" because it has a constitution, the Holy Scriptures; it has officers, ministers, elders and deacons; it has a membership roll; and it has a purpose for its existence, the gathering, defence and preservation of the church in the world. It is this church to which Christ promises, "I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world" (Matt. 28:20).

Paul reminds his spiritual son, Timothy, that the church in which Timothy laboured was "the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth" (I Tim. 3:15).

But because the Lord knew that there are countless organizations and groups which call themselves "church," He has given

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certain marks by means of which the true church can be identified. These three marks are the pure preaching of the gospel, the proper administration of the sacraments and the faithful exercise of Christian discipline (*Belgic Confession* 29).

The preaching of the gospel is the work and calling of the local church under the supervision of the elders and by an ordained minister. The administration of the sacraments is also under the supervision of the elders, is always performed by an ordained minister and must be part of the worship service and in connection with the preaching. The exercise of Christian discipline must be done by the elders but with the consent and approval of the congregation and it must be done according to the command of Christ. When these three marks are present, Christ Himself is present, because He preaches, He administers the sacraments and He binds and loosens through the labours of His church.

The church institute is the most important institution on earth. It is the most important, because the whole of the events of history take place for its benefit and to secure its salvation. The institution of civil government is, according to Paul in I Timothy 2, to rule in such a way that the people of God may live a "quiet and peaceable life" (v. 2). The institution of the workplace is to provide the people of God with the necessary finance to carry out the church's calling and to educate the children of the covenant in the fear of the Lord. Even the institution of the home is to bring forth the elect people of God who are members of the church of Christ.

The church institute is Christ's means of gathering the church, defending it from a hostile world and preserving it until His coming to take the church to glory. This is the church of which I speak, when I speak of the official witness of the church.

The Church's Existence, a Witness

The very existence of the church in the world is a solemn and incontrovertible witness by the church itself. It is a witness to the

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greatness of God and the wonder of His works in Jesus Christ. It is really a God-wrought miracle that the church survives. It is true throughout the ages that "Except the LORD of hosts had left unto us a very small remnant, we should have been as Sodom, and we should have been like unto Gomorrah" (Isa. 1:9).

Not only is the church very small here in the world, but it is the object of the contempt and hatred of the wicked. Satan and his demons, making use of the world of wickedness, are determined to destroy the church. We need only read Revelation 12:13, where the devil, after his expulsion from heaven, turns in hatred against the woman, representing the church. Jesus refers to His church as "a little flock" (Luke 12:32) and Paul warns the elders in Ephesus of wolves that enter the sheepfold of Christ (Acts 20:29).

That the church continues to exist, even though it may not, at God's solemn command, fight back with the same weapons the world uses, is a miracle of unparalleled power. The church, the true church, the church with its marks emblazoned on its front doors, has always been and will always be in the world. It is one church, one body of elect, one institution. From shortly after the fall and the announcement of the gospel, men began "to call upon the name of the LORD" (Gen. 4:26). Up to the present day, this one church has been established as an institution and has been identified by the same marks that identify it throughout the ages. It has survived innumerable attempts to destroy it. Theodore Beza, Calvin's successor in Geneva, called the attention of the king of France to this remarkable fact:

Sire, it belongs, in truth, to the church of God, in the name of which I address you, to suffer blows, not to strike them. But at the same time, let it be your pleasure to remember that the church is an anvil which has worn out many a hammer.

The fact is that "the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his" (II Tim. 2:19).

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There is no other explanation for this history-long existence of the church and its preservation.

The highly delightful proof of all this is that this church has always confessed the same truth. Never has this church wavered in her defence of the faith. That defence was fought on many fronts and was often loud with the clash of weapons. This church seemed repeatedly to go down in inglorious defeat, but it always survived: "I have left me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal" (I Kings 19:18; Rom. 11:4).

Isaiah, as so often, puts it beautifully: "This people have I formed [and preserved] for myself; they shall shew forth my praise" (Isa. 43:21).

The Church's Preaching, a Witness

When I refer to the pure preaching of the gospel, I refer to preaching done in two different ways. We must be careful to maintain this distinction. The church must preach the gospel in the established church as a crucial part of its calling. But the church must also preach the gospel in its missionary or evangelistic work. The two must not be confused, nor must either be ignored. The preaching of the gospel in the evangelistic or missionary work of the church is to the unconverted; the preaching of the gospel within the church is to the redeemed of the Lord. Confusion must not spoil this distinction.

The distinction is clear enough. In the evangelistic work of the church or in the fulfilment of its missionary calling, the church carries its work outside the established church to where there is no church or perhaps an apostate church. The purpose of such preaching is to bring unbelievers to faith in Christ. And the gospel is ordained by God to accomplish exactly such a wonderful task.

But the preaching of the gospel within the established church is to defend and preserve the church rather than gather the church.

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The people of God need nourishment of a spiritual kind. The saints need the constant power of the gospel to fulfil their calling in the world. For them the preaching of the Word is like an oasis in the wilderness where they can rest a little while, eat the heavenly bread and drink deeply from the wells of salvation. They then are ready to continue their pilgrimage. And, importantly, the church must instruct the children born into the church. They are, as Jesus points out, "[His] sheep" too, His "lambs," and they must be fed (John 21:15).

I know full well that it is customary in much of today's confused church world to have evangelistic services in the Sabbath evening worship while the morning is devoted to regular preaching. But this distinction is based on a misconception of the church. I defined the church at the outset as the gathering of believers and their seed, that is, the church is composed of believers and their seed. Where evangelistic services are held and appeals are made to the unconverted, this is done because it is mistakenly thought that the gathering of believers and their children is largely unconverted. In other words, this whole concept is based on the misconception of God's covenant, for it forgets or denies that the people of God are found in the line of believers and their seed. They must be addressed as such. Isaiah is called to preach to the church with these words, "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned" (Isa. 40:1-2).

Likewise, we may not preach on the mission field as if this group were the church and the objects of God's love and sustaining grace. To do so would be contrary to the gospel and, in fact, corrupt the truth given in Scripture. We are preaching to unconverted people what God wants said to them, not what God says to His people. Christ says to His people, "I shed my blood for you out of love for you. I save you that you may be with me." Christ says to the unconverted on the mission field, "You must repent of your sin and believe in Christ; for those who believe in Christ will be saved, but those who reject Christ will suffer God's wrath in this life and eternally in hell."

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It is true that this same thing must be said in the church, but not because the audience is composed of unbelievers, but because not all children of believers are true children of Abraham. There is a carnal seed in the church, and the Word is also a key of Christian discipline. And, further, even God's people, who still sin, must be called to repentance all their lives. Nevertheless, the established church is always addressed as the church of Christ, beloved of Him, His bride, even when she sins.

The content too is quite different. If there are any lingering doubts about the difference in content, I suggest you compare Paul's sermon on Mars Hill (Acts 17:22-34) with Paul's letter to the Ephesians, the latter of which he addresses to the church as saints (1:1).

Why the Church Is Crucial for Witnessing

The church of Christ plays a crucial role in the witnessing of the saints. The church of Christ is found where the gospel is purely preached. That gospel is "the power of God unto salvation" to all who believe (Rom. 1:16). It is, first of all, the power of God in those who are members of the church. It is the power of God to enable them to believe in Christ and find in Him the fullness of their salvation. It is the power of God to enable them to walk in the world as God's covenant people. It is the power of God that brings them into fellowship with God through Christ. As such, it is the power whereby they come to know the joy of their salvation. The truth that makes them free is a truth concerning which they cannot be silent. The mouth speaks of that of which the heart is full (Matt. 12:34-35).

In this way, the church is the only power behind witnessing. One who separates himself from the church and lives in isolation ecclesiastically cannot witness, nor will God use his witness. He needs to be fed with the true bread and drink deeply of the wellspring of grace. The church is the only place where he can receive such power.

Thus the church causes, spontaneously as it were, the people of God to strive in all their lives to live in accordance with the

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Scriptures. And these holy lives are themselves powerful witnesses in the world. The church, through its preaching, creates witnesses.

The witnessing of God's people becomes also the means whereby witnessing serves God's purpose in the salvation of the church.

Scripture is clear on this. Our *Heidelberg Catechism* makes a point of it when it talks of the necessity of good works. One reason for doing good works is that "by our godly conversation others may be gained to Christ" (A. 86).

The goal of preaching and of witnessing which God Himself accomplishes is the salvation of the church. The witnessing of the saints is the means to bring God's elect into the fellowship of the church. The church is the power of witnessing and the goal of witnessing.

Billy Graham, apart from the fact that he brought an Arminian message that was no gospel, and apart from the fact that he worked separate from the church, did grave wrong. The goal of his revivals was to get people to accept Christ. If they asked about the church, he told them that they should go to any church in which they felt comfortable. Such advice is deceitful and leads people astray.

Those who are called to be God's witnesses are called to bring people into the fellowship of a true church. They are no longer to live apart from the gathering of the saints. They are no longer to seek their spiritual bread where there is no bread. They do wrong when they join an organization that calls itself church but is not. And they do wrong when they simply live independent lives separate from the church.

The church must and does draw the elect through witnessing into the fellowship of the church. The church empowers God's people to witness. That purpose of witnessing is to bring those outside the church to faith and so into membership in the church.

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We must in all this remember that, because preaching is the power of witnessing, witnessing has the same two-fold effect as preaching (II Cor. 2:15-16). It hardens in sin those who do not believe the gospel. God wills it so. Unbelief must not dampen our enthusiasm, nor is success or failure weighed on the scales of numbers of souls won for Christ.

This, then, is the relationship between the official preaching of the gospel and Christian witnessing. Personal witnessing is possible only when the individual who witnesses puts himself under the preaching. From the preaching, he receives what must be the content of his witness; from the preaching he receives the spiritual power to witness. The preaching is the primary means of grace.

Herman Hoeksema in his *Reformed Dogmatics* says, "In a certain sense all things are means of grace for the elect."¹ That is possible because, as Scripture tells us, "all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28). But it is such only when it is organically united to the preaching. The power of witnessing lies in the preaching. The content of witnessing lies in the preaching. And the goal of witnessing is to bring those to whom we witness under the preaching. If the tie between preaching and witnessing is broken, witnessing is not used by God to save.

Rejected by Scripture, therefore, is the idea that people who themselves are not connected with a church can witness. Rejected is the notion, promoted especially by the Billy Graham crusades, that it matters not to what church a person goes as long as he accepts Christ as his Saviour. We reject as unbiblical the idea that witnessing that does not have as its content the truth of Scripture is genuine witnessing.

Preaching to a Congregation

Preaching to an established congregation is also witnessing. But

¹ Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grandville, MI: RFP, 2005), vol. 2, p. 281.

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it is witnessing to people who are the people of God. A minister who stands on the pulpit and condemns publicly the sin of divorce and remarriage is witnessing to the truth (Luke 16:18). A minister who is not afraid that he will be condemned for preaching the doctrine of divine creation in six days of twenty-four hours is witnessing (Ex. 20:11). Even when he is preaching in his own congregation, he is witnessing. When he proclaims the truth that salvation is only to be found in the all-sufficient atoning work of Christ, he is witnessing—witnessing against the heresy of Arminianism and witnessing to the truth of the gospel. When he in his preaching speaks of the necessity of repentance and faith in Christ, he is witnessing.

But the witness in the established church must be distinguished from witnessing on the mission field. Something of this has been lost. It is lost when the church has an evangelistic service (so-called) in which the preaching especially is adapted to reaching unbelievers. But I am not referring to that now. Modern technology has made the distinction I make all but impossible. I refer to the public distribution of worship services; the broadcasting of worship services; and what is called live streaming.

I must clarify this. A minister is a shepherd of one flock of sheep. He is responsible for them alone. He speaks to them in a different way than he speaks to others who are not of his flock. I can best illustrate this by referring to an incident in my own youth. I sat under the preaching of Herman Hoeksema in my late teens and early twenties. I recall that one Lord's Day evening he came to the pulpit noticeably agitated. It had come to his attention that his congregation, his sheepfold, was guilty of a particular sin. He opened his sermon with the remark, "I have something to say to you tonight. I wish I could whisper it in your ear." What he had to say was for his own flock and not for a wider audience. It was a sermon for the family. It was a reprimand and a call to repentance which the family had to hear. So it is in a congregation in which a minister addresses the needs and weaknesses of the flock under his care.

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I return now to the point I made earlier. I am not opposed as such to broadcasting the church services. After all, unbelievers or visitors from other churches may come into the worship service at any time. Nor am I opposed as such to distributing CDs or DVDs of the worship services. But it remains a fact that a minister sometimes does not say what he ought to be saying, because he knows his words are going to be heard in all sorts of places. Perhaps he holds back sharper doctrines of Scripture, because unbelievers “out there” might be offended. He refrains from scolding his congregation and calling them to repentance, because he does not want others to hear what is wrong with his congregation. Nor is it their concern. He is like a father in a public square who waits until he is home to reprimand his son for bad conduct. In short, if he looks at the preaching from the viewpoint of the wider distribution of his message, he no longer preaches the whole counsel of God, because he is preaching to those outside of his congregation rather than to his sheep.

If he can put out of his mind everything that is being done with modern technology and just be determined to feed his flock alone, then these other means of bringing the gospel outside the church may be approved. It is not wrong for others to listen in to what a shepherd says to his sheep, and God may, and often does, use these private admonitions to bring unbelievers to faith in Christ. But I am fearful of how the consciousness of a wider audience of people affects a minister’s preaching. I know from experience the very real danger. A minister can and must say to his congregation, “God loves you.” He cannot and may not say that to those outside. A minister may tell his congregation, “You have the grace of God in your hearts and are God’s chosen people; now obey Him and do what He has given you the power to do.” But he cannot and may not say such a thing to a wider audience.

When a minister opens the worship service with the words, “Beloved in our Lord Jesus Christ,” Christ Himself is saying this to His church whom He addresses as His beloved. Those words are not for a wider audience of unbelievers and of those content to be at ease in a false church—because many people who are

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content in a false church say to themselves (as one once said to me), "When I want to hear a good sermon for a change, I connect with the worship services of your churches."

Yet the preaching in a congregation is as much a witness as any witness that can possibly be made. It is, in fact, the decisive witness.

It is my judgment that to fail to make a proper distinction and to blur the lines between witnessing in the church and outside the church lead to several other serious wrongs.

It often happens that a church that gives itself over to witnessing becomes so absorbed in witnessing that the witness of the preaching to the children of the congregation is neglected or down-played. There is some watery Sunday School in which children are told simple Bible stories and given religious pictures to colour. But these children, also members of the church, are not given the preaching which only an office-bearer can give. Furthermore, this same notion that the preaching is too difficult or "deep" for children leads to excusing the children from the worship service, when the minister is about to launch into his sermon.

The result of a failure to make proper distinctions leads also to a watering down of the confession of faith of the mature youth in the church. When they appear before the office-bearers to make confession of faith, they are asked only one question, "Do you sincerely and truly love Jesus?" If their answer is affirmative, that confession of sincerity is deemed sufficient. But the office-bearers in the church need to know more than this. They need to know from a young person *why* he or she is making confession in *this* church and not in the Pentecostal church around the corner or in the Arminian church across the street. In Reformed churches that take these things seriously, one of the questions asked the youth at public confession of faith is, "Do you acknowledge the doctrine ... taught *here in this Christian church* to be the true and complete doctrine of salvation?" An affirmative answer to this question is important.

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Many congregations have evangelism committees. They make it their business to bring the truth taught in their congregations to wider audiences. They send out CDs and DVDs; they prepare and distribute pamphlets; they sponsor speeches and lectures for the public. But their work also is directly related to and dependent on solid preaching in the congregation itself.

The official witness of the church is decisive for all true witnessing. And, we may add, a church that is faithful in her witness within the congregation will also be faithful in her witness outside the church.

Personal Witnessing by the Word

David J. Engelsma

But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear (I Pet. 3:15).

Introduction

The topic of this chapter seems to me to be among the most important practical topics of the book and, I confess, for me personally, the instruction concerning witnessing that I most need to take to heart. All of us believers are called to speak of Jesus Christ and of the Christian and Reformed faith to others. Not only do we often fail, or refuse, when we have the opportunity, but also the calling itself is not nearly as strong in our thinking as it should be.

One excuse for our failure must be destroyed at the outset: "Let the church do it." This excuse betrays the notion that witnessing by speaking the Word of God is the calling only of the church or of the minister, and that the unordained member witnesses only through the preaching and other means of official witness that are performed by the church.

The church is the official witness of Jesus Christ. The church carries out this calling by the preacher within the congregation and by the missionary outside the congregation. Each member does participate in this official witness by virtue of his or her membership in the body, including his or her prayers on behalf of the preaching and his or her financial support.

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But this participation in the witness by the preaching of the church does not exhaust the calling of the member. In addition, each member—man, woman and child—is called by God to witness also by his or her own personal speech to others. I Peter 3:15 is not addressed to the institute of the church or only to the minister, but to every one of the members of the congregation: “be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you.”

For this personal witness, membership in a true, instituted church is necessary. It is the church that instructs and trains the members so that the members are “ready”—and able—to witness when men ask for a reason. In the institute, the Spirit of Christ works, enabling and moving members to witness.

I Thessalonians 1:8 expresses the dependency of personal witnessing on the preaching of the gospel in the local congregation: “For from you sounded out the word of the Lord not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith to God-ward is spread abroad.” The preaching of the gospel in the congregation *echoed* (this is the Greek word translated “sounded out” by the AV) through the members into all the surrounding country—by the personal witness of the members. Personal witness is the echo of the preaching of the Word of the Lord.

Personal witness is not preaching, but, for all that, witness has its worth and power as the echo of the preaching of the gospel.

Each member, female as well as male, is, and must be, a personal witness and he or she makes the witness by the Word, that is, by speaking the Word to others as he or she has opportunity. A godly Christian life is essential to this witness by the Word, but this is the subject of the next chapter in this book.

Believers are not missionaries or evangelists, that is, preachers of the gospel, but they are witnesses and their witness echoes the preaching.

The Calling

I begin by establishing the calling of every member to witness

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from Scripture, from the Reformed creeds, from significant thinkers on missions and from Calvin. I do this because of our reluctance to witness personally and because we may suffer from the mistaken idea that the Bible does not have much to say about the personal witness of the people of God.

In fact, Scripture often teaches and exhorts the witness of all believers. I have already quoted the classic text in the New Testament, I Peter 3:15: "be ready always to give an answer." The implication of the text is that every member of the church will be giving this answer and, therefore, will be witnessing to others by speaking.

I Thessalonians 1:8 has also been quoted: echoing the Word of God that the apostles preached, members of the congregation witnessed to others in all the region where the church at Thessalonica was located.

Other New Testament passages teach the calling of every member of the church to witness. Ephesians 4:29 addresses all the members: "Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers." A sound witness with the mouth builds others up in the Christian faith and thus is used by God to give grace to the ones who hear the witness. This is no inconsiderable recommendation of witnessing and no small motivation to engage in it.

Although usually quoted in regard to congregational singing, Colossians 3:16 exhorts witnessing: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord." The text exhorts witnessing by song to fellow members of the church. It points out that, contrary to popular thought, witness is not limited to those outside the church. Although the reference is to all the singing that the believers do together, including in the home by the family, singing at church is certainly not excluded. There too, if not there especially, the saints teach and admonish each other

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in congregational singing. The text insists that the songs of the people of God at church, as everywhere, be sound. Their content must be the pure Word of God, the very "word of Christ."

In obedience to this exhortation, the Protestant Reformed Churches, the Covenant Protestant Reformed Church of Northern Ireland and the Limerick Reformed Fellowship (and other churches in the British Isles and around the world) sing only the Psalms in the worship services of the congregations. They oppose the introduction of hymns into the worship services, in part, because introduction of hymns invariably leads to the singing of unsound, especially Arminian, hymns. Then there is no teaching and admonishing of each other by the members of the congregation, but rather the corrupting and deceiving of each other.

Colossians 4:6 also calls the believing members of the church to witness by his or her words: "Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man." This exhortation immediately follows the warning: "Walk in wisdom toward them that are without" (v. 5), making plain that verse 6 refers to witnessing to persons outside the church. And the exhortation comes to all the members of the church.

John 1:40-42 is an especially instructive and encouraging passage on witnessing. John the Baptist preached that Jesus is the Son of God and the Lamb of God (vv. 29, 34). Two men heard this official witness to Jesus by the preacher, John, and followed Jesus as disciples. Then, one of the two, a man named Andrew, said to his brother, "We have found the Messiah" (v. 41)! He brought his brother to Jesus. That brother was Peter.

This is how we are to witness: "I have found the Messiah in the preaching of Him at church; come with me to Him by coming to hear Him in the preaching of Him at church!"

The Reformed Creeds

Their creeds bind the duty of witnessing upon Reformed Chris-

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tians. The *Heidelberg Catechism* points out the calling of every Christian in Question 32, where it is explaining the name "Christian" in connection with Jesus' title, "Christ:" "I am a member of Christ by faith, and thus am partaker of His anointing; that so I may confess His name." To be a Christian is to share in the anointing of Jesus Christ, specifically here His prophetic office. This office of prophet, which every believer occupies, consists of confessing Jesus Christ, that is, witnessing to Him by word. Christ is the one, true Prophet, who witnesses to God and the truth in the world. The man or woman who is united to Christ by faith shares in Christ's appointment and qualification to witness. Such is the importance, indeed necessity, of witnessing that if I fail, or refuse, to witness, I virtually show that I am no Christian.

Although in this question the emphasis is on the witness to Christ by the good works of His people, Question 86 of the *Catechism* holds before Reformed Christians one of the blessed fruits of witnessing, whether by one's good works or by one's speech: "that by our godly conversation others may be gained to Christ."

But there is more to the creedal basis of witnessing by all believers than only a few, explicit, isolated references to witnessing. The Christian religion is a confessional religion from the *Apostles' Creed* to the *Three Forms of Unity* and the *Westminster Standards*. The truth is that all Christians confess the faith not only at church, but also everywhere as they have opportunity. All know what the faith is, and all are bold and eager to speak it to others. Confessing the faith is witnessing.

Authorities on Missions

All recognized scholars and authorities on missions are agreed that the witness of the members of the church is fundamental to the spread of the gospel and the growth of the church. I quote two who are representative (which quotations do not indicate approval of all the thinking of these men on missions, much less of their entire theology). The first is the American

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Presbyterian missionary to China, Japan and Korea in the nineteenth century, John L. Nevius:

In the early history of the Church, as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, Christianity spread chiefly through the voluntary zeal of ordinary church members, and the work of the Apostles consisted mainly in superintending and organizing the companies of Christians thus gathered. Their zeal was so great that persecution could not repress, but only intensified it. If there is not that zeal and effort in the Church at home, it is much to be deplored. Perhaps the want of it is due in a great measure to a growing habit of leaving work for Christ to be done by those who are paid for it. Where such an idea prevails, whether at home or on missionary ground, it tends to paralyze the power of the Church for good.¹

Later, Nevius added this observation:

The members of the early Church were all witness-bearers. Such we must teach our church members to be; and without such an agency as our main dependence, we have little reason to expect the Gospel to prevail in China.²

The second quotation is from the English Anglican missionary to China, from 1895-1903, Roland Allen. In his book, *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church*, Allen wrote,

This then is what I mean by spontaneous expansion. I mean the expansion which follows the unexhorted and unorganized activity of individual members of the Church explaining to others the Gospel which they have found for themselves.³

¹ John L. Nevius, *The Planting and Development of Missionary Churches* (Hancock, NH: Monadnock Press, 2003), p. 35.

² *Ibid.*, p. 71.

³ Roland Allen, *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI:

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Allen then warned, "A Christianity which does not propagate itself languishes, if it does not perish."⁴

Lest anyone suppose that an emphasis on personal witnessing by every believer is somehow unreformed, I also quote John Calvin. Appealing to Isaiah 43:10, "Ye are my witnesses," whence the title of this book is taken, as was the theme of the conference that is the source of the book, Calvin wrote, "No one deserves the title of Christian unless he witnesses to his faith when there is occasion, and according as God gives him means and opportunity." Calvin insists that the reference is to all the members of the church: "God through the prophet Isaiah speaks this way of all his faithful in general."⁵

What the Church Member Witnesses

As Calvin stated in the quotation just given, the content of the witness of the believer is "his faith." The faith of the believing child of God is the whole of the Christian faith as revealed in the Bible, according to the requirements of a particular encounter. The witness is not restricted to the invitation to attend church or the exhortation to accept and read a pamphlet. The believer may, and must, speak of the one, true God and His glory, which are the particular truths exhorted in Isaiah 43:10ff. and in I Thessalonians 1:8f.

The believer may, and must, speak of Jesus Christ as Saviour from sin and death by His cross and as Lord of all by His resurrection.

The believer may, and must, speak of the unique Christian hope, indeed of his own, personal, precious hope, consisting of victory over death and the grave, and of everlasting life.

Eerdmans, 1962), p. 7.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁵ John Calvin, "A Response to a Certain Dutchman (1562)," in *Come Out From Among Them: 'Anti-Nicodemite' Writings of John Calvin* (Dallas, TX: Protestant Heritage Press, 2001), p. 304.

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The believer may, and must, speak of creation by God as the explanation of origins.

The believer may, and must, speak of righteous, godly behaviour as commanded by God.

In all of this witness and more, the believer may, and must, refute the lie; his witness may, and must, be controversial and polemical. Both Isaiah 43 and I Thessalonians 1 suggest that the witness of the saints contradicts prevailing idolatry: "how ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God" (v. 9).

Witness in the Course of Everyday Life

The calling of all believers to witness does not take them from their ordinary way of life and everyday, earthly vocation. It does not make the believer a "full-time evangelist" or "kingdom-worker." Neither does he witness without regard to appropriate circumstances. He is not called by God to be witnessing constantly to his co-workers at his place of employment when he and they ought to be concentrating on working.

The calling is always there but the time and circumstances are not always propitious. Calvin speaks of "when there is occasion, and according as God gives him means and opportunity." I Peter 3:15 gives direction regarding the time and occasion of witness: People ask us a reason for our hope. Others open up the way to witness.

If going door to door is not forbidden, neither is it commanded. Scripture intends that we witness, and be ready to witness, always, as we go about our regular duties and live our normal lives.

Qualified

For the difficult, demanding and sometimes dangerous work of witnessing, every believer is qualified. To this work, every

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believer is motivated. The Spirit of the Chief Prophet, Jesus the Christ, qualifies every believer to witness. This is the assurance of Question 32 of the *Heidelberg Catechism*: the believer shares in Christ's anointing. Anointed by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, the believer knows the truth. He or she is also enabled to bear witness to the truth properly. This addresses and allays one of our fears about witnessing, namely, that we lack the ability to be witnesses. The believer has not had seminary training. He or she is not a theologian. Some doctrines are deep and hard to explain. But believers have the Spirit.

The Spirit also motivates: love for God; zeal for our Saviour and Lord; regard for the gospel, by which we ourselves are saved; love for the neighbour who stands before us in the misery of his sin or in the wretchedness of idolatry. We cannot remain silent. Like Paul in Athens, our spirit is stirred in us. Therefore, Paul disputed in the synagogues. Therefore, we speak up (Acts 17:16-17).

The Objects of Our Witness

According to I Peter 3:15, we are to witness to "*every* man that asketh [us] a reason." The objects of our witness are anyone and everyone to whom God gives to us the opportunity to speak of Him, His Christ and His salvation.

We may profitably make some definite identifications.

First, the objects of witness are representatives of an antichristian, persecuting world of ungodly men and women. To these we witness under pressure and with the threat of suffering for our witness. To such a society did the early New Testament church witness. Against the pressure to deny Jesus Christ by confessing that Caesar was lord, the early Christians witnessed to their enemies that "Jesus is Lord." By no means was this witnessing a matter of a pleasant, religious exercise of a summer evening, knocking on doors in suburbia, with the slamming of a door in one's face as the worst possible outcome. On the contrary, the witness of the early New Testament Christians la-

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boured under threat of imprisonment, torture and death. Understandably (though inexcusably) afraid, some members of the church failed to witness to Jesus' lordship in the face of the dire consequences of the witness. The "fearful" in Revelation 21:8, who have their part in the lake of fire, are those who refused to witness to the lordship of Jesus because of the very real threat of suffering.

This day is not far off in the nations of the so-called "Christian West," including the United States. In view not only of the hostility toward God, His Christ and the true church by all branches of government and by the popular media, but in view also of the ungodly thinking of a majority of the citizenry, it is likely in the near future that the Christian confession that Jesus Christ is the only Saviour and Lord, the only way of salvation, thus condemning particularly the religion of Islam and its Mohammed, will bring fines and imprisonment upon those who give this witness. Because the witness to the lordship of Jesus extends to the behaviour of humans, the testimony that sodomite and lesbian sex is abominable perversion and that relations between males and males or females and females are not, and can never be, marriages will soon be visited with punishment. As the early Christians condemned Rome's infanticide of exposing newborn babies, so the church today condemns the United States' butchery of the unborn, the partially born and even the newly born as murder. The godless will find this indictment intolerable. Then witnessing or non-witnessing will again be a matter of life or death.

Second, the objects of witness are our unbelieving neighbour, relative or other acquaintance. These are people with whom we come into contact in the course of our normal life and work. These people may themselves give us the opportunity or occasion of serious, positive witness. Often, our strange behaviour occasions a probing question or direct challenge: Sabbath observance; abstinence from certain forms of entertainment; refusal to have fellowship with ungodly men and women; a patient response to troubles and disappointments in life. Or a

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conversation concerning death or concerning the meaning of life or concerning calamities in creation and society may open up to us the opportunity to speak of our hope with regard to death, of the meaning of life as living unto God or of the judgments of a wrathful God upon a wicked world.

Third, there are times when we are called to witness to the advocates of false religions or of false doctrines. Then our witness may, and must, be polemical. We engage in doctrinal controversy, defending the gospel of grace in Jesus Christ or some particular doctrine that makes up this gospel. The witness of the prophets, of Jesus Himself and of the apostles was often polemical—sharply polemical.

Here, as an essential element of witnessing, comes up the subject of apologetics. The word itself means “defence of the faith.” It is not the same as “apologize,” which describes a confession of error. Rather, apologetics is a vigorous defence of the truth of the Christian religion, especially when some aspect of the truth is questioned, denied or attacked. This is the Greek word used in I Peter 3:15 that the Authorized Version translates as “answer” (“be ready always to give an *answer*”). The use of this Greek word in the text suggests that the one who asks us a reason for our hope may be unfriendly. The form of his request for a reason may well be an attack on some aspect of our faith and hope.

Apologetics, or a defence of the faith, has been important in the history of the church. A group of early church fathers are known as the “Apologetists,” because they defended the Christian faith against attacks on it by the Jews and by learned Greek philosophers. Luther’s *Bondage of the Will* was a defence of sovereign grace against the attack on the truth by the Roman Catholic humanist, Desiderius Erasmus. Calvin’s *Institutes* was a defence of the Reformed faith against the attack on it by the Roman Catholic Church and by the Roman Catholic civil government of France. The *Canons of Dordt* were an apology for “The Five Points of Calvinism” against the attack on them by the disciples of the Dutch heretic, James Arminius.

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Such apologetical witness has fallen into disfavour today. The mood in the churches today is toleration, the acceptance of the thinking and way of life of everybody. This mood is advertised as a love that declines to condemn the beliefs of anyone. It is, therefore, evidently, not the love of God. In this humanistic love, Christian theologians and churches refuse to condemn even the cultic theology of Mormonism or the false religion of Islam.

But apologetic witness is the calling of the church, especially by means of her ministers and theologians: "earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3). The members of the church must not criticize their ministers for carrying out this task.

Defence of the faith is the duty also of every Christian, when creation is questioned by proponents of evolutionary theory; when the atonement of Christ is challenged by those who hold the theory of universal atonement; when the doctrine and practice of Christian marriage are attacked by those who advocate divorce for every reason and subsequent remarriage.

"Be ready always to give an *apology!*"

Refusal to defend the faith is not love; it is refusal to witness.

But the objects of our witness are also fellow believers, fellow members of the church. With them, our witness comforts, encourages, edifies, instructs and even sometimes rebukes. According to Colossians 3:16, we teach and admonish *each other* in our singing. Matthew 18:15ff. calls us all to confront an erring *brother* with his sin and to call him to repentance. Christian discipline begins with mutual witness *in the congregation*. I Thessalonians 4:18 commands believers to comfort "*one another*" with the words of the sure bodily resurrection when loved ones die. It is a serious mistake to ignore our witness to each other because of a total concentration on the lost outside the church.

Indeed, our own family is the object of witness: the husband to his wife; the wife to her husband; both husband and wife

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to their children and grandchildren; and the children to each other, especially the older children to their younger brothers and sisters.

As an extension of the home, the teachers in the Christian school witness to the covenant children.

All of this witness has a spiritual effect. Believers should be aware of this effect, as an encouragement to witness.

The Effects

The effect of witnessing may well be persecution and, therefore, suffering—suffering for Christ’s sake.

We must not have an unrealistic, foolishly optimistic expectation concerning the witness of the members of the church. We must not suppose that all to whom we witness will respond positively to the witness. The effect, in these days shortly before the return of Christ, will not be that hordes of converts swell the rolls of the congregation.

Martyrdom

The Greek word for witness is “*martyr*.” In Revelation 11:3, where the Spirit describes the true church in the last days as “my two witnesses,” the word translated “witnesses” is, literally, “martyrs.” A martyr is a member of the church who willingly gives up his or her life on behalf of his or her witness to Jesus Christ. This will be the case with regard to the two witnesses of Revelation 11. Verse seven predicts that when the witnesses “shall have finished their testimony [i.e., their witnessing], the beast ... shall overcome them, and kill them.”

There is good reason why the Greek of Scripture uses the word “martyr” for a witness. The usual, if not invariable, result of faithful witness is martyrdom. We must keep in mind that there are other forms of martyrdom than loss of physical life in actual, physical death. There is also hatred, reproach, ridicule, ostracism.

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Ostracism is a favourite tactic of the enemies of those who witness to the truth in times when physical persecution is not in vogue. The true church and her spokesmen are deliberately and ostentatiously ignored and, as it were, banished to the far country of non-existence. Thus, they are put on public display as worthless—as “a spectacle unto the world,” as “the filth of the world, and ... the offscouring of all things” (I Cor. 4:9, 13).

The relation between witnessing and martyrdom is also that martyrdom is itself a powerful witness. The two witnesses of Revelation 11 not only witnessed with the result that they were killed or martyred, but they also witnessed to the lordship of Jesus Christ and the gospel *by* their willing death for the sake of Christ and the gospel.

Many of the outstanding passages in the New Testament that teach witnessing make plain that the outcome will be persecution and suffering. I Peter 3:15 stands in the immediate context of the suffering of the witnesses, that is, martyrdom. Verse fourteen reads, “But and if ye suffer for righteousness’ sake, happy are ye: and be not afraid of their terror, neither be troubled.” And verse sixteen sounds the same note: “Having a good conscience; that, whereas they speak evil of you, as of evildoers, they may be ashamed that falsely accuse your good conversation in Christ.”

As we have seen, I Thessalonians 1:8 commends the Thessalonian Christians for echoing the Word of God throughout the region by their personal witness. The next chapter reveals what the cost of the witness was: “ye also have suffered like things of your own countrymen, even as they [i.e., the members of the church in Judaea] have of the Jews” (2:14). And what were those things that the Thessalonians suffered as the effect of their witness? Opposition, persecution and murder (v. 15).

The result of deacon Stephen’s witness in Acts 7 is familiar: he was stoned to death. In Acts 22:20, Paul refers to Stephen as God’s “*martyr*,” that is, “witness.”

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What was the result of Jesus' witness, for Himself (in Revelation 1:5, Jesus is called "the faithful witness"); of their witness, for the apostles; of their witness, for the early Christians, who were made a spectacle to the world and died cruelly by fire or in the teeth of lions or on the horns of bulls; of his witness, for Luther; of his witness, for Calvin, who was humiliated by citizens of Geneva naming their dogs "Calvin;" of their witness, for faithful ministers in recent times, who were deposed, slandered, ridiculed and ostracized—de Cock, Machen, Hoeksema?

The same will be the effect of their witness for Christians today. Satan hates our witness. The world of the ungodly is hardened by our witness, reacting angrily against those who demolish their gods, charge them with idolatry and condemn their lawless lives.

This is why courage is necessary. To this courage belongs the certainty that even martyrdom is a good, worthwhile effect of our witness. Regardless of the outcome, we have showed forth the praises of Him who has called us "out of darkness into his marvellous light" (I Pet. 2:9). God is glorified by our suffering. The truth is confirmed. The wicked world is made ready for the second coming of Christ and the final judgment. And we ourselves are blessed: we suffer with Christ so that we may be glorified together with Him (Rom. 8:17).

But martyrdom is not the only effect of the witness of the saints to Christ and the gospel.

Spiritual Welfare

There is also a positive effect: the spiritual welfare of those to whom we witness; eventually, their conversion to Jesus Christ; and what Roland Allen called "the spontaneous expansion of the church."

That the believer is no preacher and that God is pleased to use the preaching of the gospel by the office of the ministry to save sinners and gather the church do not imply that there is no

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positive spiritual working of God by means of the witness of believers. This is the impression that can be left by a certain emphasis on preaching as the chief means of grace. The result can be that the believer thinks, "What's the use? There is no reason for me to witness with the Word; I am not a preacher." Nor does it do justice to the positive effect of his witness to assure the believer that he or she can be used to bring people to church, where they do hear the preaching, by which God brings some to faith, unites them to Christ and bestows on them salvation, important as this is.

There is spiritual power in the Word of God that the believer speaks in witnessing. Therefore, faithful witness has positive fruit in the thinking, the willing, the feeling, and the doing of some to whom the witness is brought. Even though the Word is only echoed by the believer (I Thess. 1:8)—"sounded forth" as from a sounding board—it is still the echo of the Word of God, and the Word of God has power to enlighten, to convict and to draw even in its echo.

In Matthew 18:15, Jesus does not hesitate to say that the Word brought by a member of the church to a fellow member living in sin has the power to bring the sinner to repentance, so that a Christian "hast gained [his] brother."

Parents, although not preachers, are instruments used of Christ for the salvation of their covenant children in the sense that their instruction, their comfort and their rebuke by the Word of God accomplish the spiritual welfare, the spiritual growth, the spiritual recovery and the spiritual endurance of their children.

In those whom God has regenerated, the Word brought by the Christian can convict of sin, guilt, shame and judgment; can expose doctrinal error; can create awareness of the great blessedness and salvation that are in Jesus Christ, as proclaimed by Christ's church; and can, thus, draw to the preaching of Christ in and by the church. Thus, men and women are brought to Jesus Christ and salvation in the church.

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What did the Samaritan woman do, to whom Jesus witnessed with a witness that sharply rebuked her adultery? She went back to her city and told the people, "Come, see a man, which told me all things that ever I did: is not this the Christ?" (John 4:29). The effect of her witness was that "many of the Samaritans of that city believed on him [i.e., Jesus] for the saying of the woman, which testified [the verb in the Greek is a form of the word "*martyr*" or "*witness*"], He told me all that ever I did" (v. 39).

What did Jesus command the Gadarene demoniac, after He had saved him from possession by an unclean spirit? "Go home to thy friends, and tell them how great things the Lord hath done for thee, and hath had compassion on thee" (Mark 5:19). The man did what Jesus commanded. "And he departed, and began to publish in Decapolis how great things Jesus had done for him" with the effect that "all men did marvel" (v. 20).

Has Jesus done less for us? I think not!

Does He charge us differently than He did the demoniac of Gadara? I do not suppose so!

Are we as obedient as was that man? Each may answer this question for himself or herself before the face of our Lord.

The Personal Witness of a Godly Life

Herman Hanko

But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear (1 Pet. 3:15).

Introduction

When witnessing is discussed in ecclesiastical circles, the discussion almost always is centred in the personal witness of the individual. How is each Christian required to witness? What must be his technique? What is the best way to approach people? Classes are organized to teach people how to witness. Inspirational meetings are organized to stimulate zeal for witnessing. Motives are discussed and goals are defined.

We cannot and will not argue with the fact that God's people individually are called to witness in this world. But there are two ways especially in which the emphasis on individual witnessing goes wrong. One error is surely the idea that witnessing is separated from the life and witness of the church of Christ. A person is on his own in this matter of witnessing. It is a calling divorced from, and independent of, membership in the church. Witnessing in today's thinking never takes account of the fact that true witnessing has its spiritual roots in the church of which the witness is a member and that it draws its life from that church.

Closely related to the separation of witnessing from the church is the goal of witnessing. To how many people did you witness today? Have you filled your quota? How many souls have you

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gained for Christ? How successful have you been in telling people about Jesus? The motive for witnessing frequently becomes the saving of souls. This motive is wrong. It is wrong because no man can save another. And it is wrong because witnessing must always have as its goal to bring a person into the fellowship of the church and under the preaching of the gospel to the glory of God.

I Peter 3:15

When we talk about individual witnessing, it is well that we begin with a discussion of a key text that sheds light on this subject and points us to a way not frequently emphasized by those who put much emphasis on witnessing. I refer to I Peter 3:15. The text reads, "But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear."

To understand the full significance of this passage for our witnessing it is necessary to give attention to the context of the verse in the epistle.

In verse one of this epistle, Peter points out that he is addressing saints in Asia Minor (all of which provinces are mentioned, except the province where Tarsus was found). More particularly, Peter addresses the saints in these provinces from the viewpoint of their life as pilgrims and strangers in the world. They are, of course, pilgrims and strangers in the spiritual sense of the word. Peter explains the origin of their spiritual pilgrimage: "Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ" (v. 2).

One who is, from a spiritual point of view, a stranger in this earth is one who has another homeland than this present world. He was not born into it by his first birth, but by election and sanctification his home land has become heaven. That is the place of his second birth.

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In almost every respect, he is from “another world.” His Father and Elder Brother Jesus Christ are in heaven. His family who have already died are all in heaven. Heaven is his home, because in his “Father’s house are many mansions” (John 14:2).

The principle of his life is heavenly, because it is the resurrection life of his Saviour. It is the principle of everlasting life, because he shall never die. The power and influence of his life are, therefore, conformity to the holiness and righteousness of heaven itself. He is, although only in principle, sanctified and made perfect. He reflects in his life the holiness of his Father: he “looks like” his Father, because he bears his Father’s image and likeness.

But although all this is true, he is called by his Father to live in this world for a little while. He is, therefore, from a spiritual point of view, a foreigner in this world. His way of living is entirely different from the customs of those who surround him in this world. The world is wicked and lives in a way that is fundamentally different from the life he now lives.

It is true that he himself still carries within him a depraved nature which is exactly like the wicked world. Nevertheless, his life is controlled and directed by the powerful and gracious influences of his real home.

He is called to live in this wicked world as a citizen of the kingdom of heaven and as a member of the family of God. That makes him, in the eyes of those with whom he comes into contact, a very strange person: one whom the world cannot understand. He rejects entirely their way of living and insists on another way exactly the opposite of the way they live. He is fundamentally disinterested in all the things which sinfully attract the wicked.

The Implications of Being a Pilgrim

The first implication of being a pilgrim is that such an one lives by hope. The Christian virtue of hope is the outstanding theme

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of Peter's first epistle. The epistle itself begins with a doxology of praise to God who has regenerated us unto a "lively hope" (1:3). So much is hope the theme of the epistle that Peter is sometimes called "the apostle of hope," as John is called "the apostle of love."

The Christian virtue of hope in Peter's letter is not a mere virtue that appears from time to time in the believer's life; on the contrary, it is a whole way of living. That is, the Christian's hope determines everything he does in this world. The object of his hope is heaven itself, which is, in fact, his home. That hope to go home compels the Christian to live differently from the wicked in this world. He is a stranger in the world with no abiding place here. He is on a spiritual journey. He carries his tent on his back. He keeps his backpack as light as he can, so that he is not inhibited in the path he pursues in his journey heavenward.

Because his way of living is so strange to the people of the world, he is the object of their scrutiny and, finally, of their questioning. The text presupposes all this, for the question that the unbeliever asks is the occasion for his strong and sharp witness.

This is the point which needs to be made. When Scripture speaks of one's personal witness, it indicates that the unbeliever takes the initiative; and Scripture does not seem to urge the Christian to be aggressive in his own witnessing.

There is, I think, good reason for this. God knows who His people are; we do not. While there is not necessarily anything sinful in collaring people in public places and quizzing them concerning their relation to Christ, it does not seem as if God particularly uses this method of witnessing. While there can be nothing wrong with distributing leaflets, pamphlets and tracts, my general impression is that it gives the one witnessing in this way a sense of doing his duty, while the fruits of such witnessing are often meagre.

God, who knows who are His elect, and Christ, who knows each one for whom He shed His blood, will save them. And if

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the means He uses to save them is Christian witnessing, God will see to it that that person is confronted with the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ by a Christian who is walking his own path in life.

The point that Peter is making is that the Christian's life is a powerful witness and that a verbal witness follows.

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The life of godliness in this world in obedience to the command of Christ is therefore the primary individual witness of the believer.

There is a negative side to this. When a person who claims to be a Christian walks in an unfaithful manner to God in his life, he has lost his right to witness and has instead brought shame and disrepute on the cause of Christ.

An example of this is found in II Samuel 11-12. These two chapters of Scripture describe for us David's sin of adultery with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, and his subsequent murder of Uriah. When Nathan the prophet was sent to David to bring David to repentance for his terrible sins, the Word of God indeed softened David's hard heart and brought him to the sorrow he expressed in Psalm 51. He was truly sorry and he was pardoned by God's rich grace in Jesus Christ.

Nevertheless, Nathan had some very harsh words for David:

Now therefore the sword shall never depart from thine house; because thou hast despised me, and hast taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be thy wife. Thus saith the LORD, Behold, I will raise up evil against thee out of thine own house, and I will take thy wives before thine eyes, and give them unto thy neighbour, and he shall lie with thy wives in the sight of this sun. For thou didst it secretly: but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun ... Howbeit, because by this deed thou hast given great occasion

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to the enemies of the LORD to blaspheme, the child also that is born unto thee shall surely die (II Sam. 12:10-12, 14).

David was surely forgiven when he confessed his sin. However, he had not only sinned against God, but in doing so he had given the enemies of God occasion to slander the cause of Christ. The enemies could and did say that David claimed to worship God, and now he had committed a sin that rivalled any sin done among the Gentiles. His worship of God meant nothing. When those who profess to love God commit sin, the wicked mockingly say that all the lives of Christians are a farce and all that they teach is worthless.

Hence, the sword would never depart from David's house, which judgment was fulfilled, for example, in the cases of Absalom and Adonijah. Sadly, much of the effectiveness of David's reign in Israel was over.

The point is that a sinful life by a child of God is harmful for witnessing, because the people to whom one witnesses are prompted to mock the cause of God rather than see in it a triumph of saving grace. A godly walk is crucial.

Altogether too much "witnessing" is done by people who themselves live in disobedience to God. Altogether too much "witnessing" is emphasized by churches which condone sinful lives.

In a world steeped in immorality, fornication and adultery, how is it possible for one to be an instrument in God's hand to bring others to Christ when such a one is himself guilty of scorning God's marriage institution by divorce and remarriage? His life repudiates his witness.

How is it possible for a greedy person who builds mansions, piles up riches and strives day and night to accumulate more of this world's goods to be a witness in a covetous world which has only treasures on earth? How can he, by his life, witness to his hope, a hope born out of this life as a pilgrim and a stranger in the earth?

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How can one point others to the pleasures of salvation when he himself finds all his pleasure in drinking, partying and carousing? He makes a mockery of the Christian life, brings shame on the church and on the name of the Lord Jesus, and excludes himself from being a witness.

Even more can be said. How can one who is content in a church where the gospel is truncated or denied be a witness to the cause of Christ's truth? How can a church that holds to a universal love of God and a universal cross of Christ bring others to see the beauty of the truth of salvation by grace alone through faith alone? How can one who denies the clear and unambiguous teachings of Scripture ever witness as God's instrument in the world when he himself is unfaithful to that truth?

Peter is very concerned that Christians should live a life which is directed by our hope. He is concerned about living in such a manner that befits a Christian in every relationship in life. He spells it out in detail. And the key word in every relationship of life is submission to the will of Christ through submission to those in authority over us. He speaks of the relation between pilgrims and their earthly rulers. He addresses the relationships between employers and employees in the workplace. He points out what it means to be a Christian in marriage and in the home. He defines our calling in the church, towards office-bearers and towards our fellow saints. He spares no words in his insistence that a pilgrim keep himself from all the evils around him, evils born in hell. And, above all, because the churches to which he writes were being persecuted, pilgrims must follow in the footsteps of Christ when they suffer for their faith. Nothing is omitted. It is all there, clearly, in God's Word in I Peter.

And so we will be asked about our way of life, but only if we live as Scripture commands.

The Questions Asked

Questions put to us by those around us can be of different kinds and asked for different reasons. Some may simply be curious

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why a pilgrim is opposed to remarriage after any divorce when it is a way of life in the world. Some may be genuinely interested because God has already begun His work of grace in their hearts and they are dissatisfied with the church they attend or with the way of life they have become accustomed to lead. But some may ask a reason for the hope that is in us, because they are amazed at how different we are as pilgrims from the world in which we live.

In an age of unionism and labour war, the pilgrim submits to his employer, even when his employer is a heartless man who refuses to pay his worker a salary on which the employee can live. An unbeliever, to whom money means everything, cannot understand such conduct.

In an age of immorality and fornication, it is strange to find a man who abhors violence, sexual sins, pornography on the internet and in movies, but speaks of purity and holiness. Why does he live this way? This conduct of the Christian is beyond the understanding of wicked men and arouses their curiosity.

In an age in which family life is systematically being destroyed by laws which encourage sexual immorality, why does a pilgrim wife take care of her crippled and brain-injured husband out of a pure love which compels her to be faithful to him?

Why do these pilgrims oppose abortion, love children, have large families, support both public schools by their taxes and Christian schools with their hard-earned money when their wages are already low?

Why do these people go to church twice on a hot Sunday and refuse to go to the beach or the local picnic grounds?

Living in a church environment in which the password is tolerance of every one's beliefs, why are these people so adamantly opposed to every deviation from the norm of Scripture?

Above all, why are these people happy when they are tortured and mocked? Why do they pray for those who persecute them?

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Why do they rejoice that they are counted worthy to suffer for Christ's sake?

It is not without reason that Peter introduces this aspect of the pilgrim's calling with the words, "sanctify the Lord God in your hearts." To sanctify means to make holy. And if the heart is holy, the entire person is holy. Holiness is, therefore, essential to a life of witnessing—holiness in the whole of one's walk.

The Pilgrim's Answer

It is our lives that are the most powerful witness. A life in any respect contrary to the will of God destroys all possibility of witnessing.

But the witness of the believer goes beyond a godly life. He must be always ready to give an answer to those who ask him a reason for the hope that is within him. A godly life must be and will be followed by the spoken word.

The word Peter uses in this text and which is translated "answer" is a word from which we get our English word "apology." We must be ready to give an apology to those who ask us for a reason for our hope.

The word "apology" is not intended to be a confession of wrong, a way in which the word is commonly used. But it is intended to have the meaning it has in that branch of theological discourse called "Apologetics." Apologetics is the defence of the faith over against error. Peter requires that we be ready to defend our hope. That defence must not be a mere reiteration of what we believe and a recital of the elements of our godly walk. It must be a reasoned, biblically-grounded, understandable defence of our hope. It must be a witness to the truth of God's Word and a call to the one with whom we are speaking to repent of sin and believe in Christ, because impenitence ends in the judgment of hell which comes from God's fierce wrath upon the workers of iniquity.

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Such an apology is witnessing in the highest and best sense of the word. God brings a man to us who needs to hear the witness to the truth. We do not witness willy-nilly and without a definite purpose. We witness only by the powerful witness of our own life as pilgrims and strangers who live by the principle of hope. And God uses our faithful "apology" for His own sovereign purpose. Our defence proves that the way we live, instead of indulging in all the lusts of the flesh, is eminently desirable.

Our Witness as Members of the Church

Although I have made a point of the importance of the official witness of the church in chapter 3, a word concerning its importance in Christian witnessing is necessary here also.

Peter places a great deal of emphasis on the church and its central place in the life of a pilgrim. He does so in his admonition to elders in chapter 5:1-4, but he also talks about that church in chapter 2:1-10. The church occupies a central place in the life of the pilgrim. It is a beginning of our eternal rest which is the object of our hope. It reminds us where we are going and why we are pilgrims here.

But the Lord's Day is also a spiritual oasis in the wilderness of this present time. We have no spiritual nourishment in the world that can feed and sustain our souls. We need this, for it is the way we have strength to endure the rigours of our spiritual journey. In church, we are fed with the Bread of Life, which is our Lord Jesus Christ. In the oasis of the church, we drink deeply of the cool and refreshing water of life, which is the Holy Spirit of Christ, who alone can lead and guide us through the tangle of this world to greater heights and everlasting glory.

To drive the point home, Peter reminds us that the new life of Christ is ours through the Word of God (1:23-25). He tells us that this Word of God is the gospel preached in the church. That gospel is the pure milk of the Word, which we are to crave with the same almost frantic desire that characterizes a newborn babe (2:1-3). He goes on to point out that faith in Christ,

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who is the cornerstone of the church, is what makes us living stones who are built upon Christ and so become the temple of God in which God Himself dwells in us as our covenant God in whom He dwells (vv. 4-10).

The church is central to the life of a pilgrim, and the Word of God is essential. The power and effectiveness of a Christian's witness come from the preaching of the gospel, which is the church's one and only calling. As a member of the true church, a Christian is able to witness. In isolation, he is not, but becomes a dumb block.

At the same time, his total absorption in Christ's church is also itself a witness to a world that despises the Lord's Day, corrupts it in every way and hates the preaching of the truth. Because his life in relation to the church is so important to him, his witness is the means to bring others into the fellowship of the church and under the preaching of Christ crucified.

Witnessing, a Two-Edged Sword

In his discussion of the importance of the church in the life of the Christian witness, Peter talks about the fact that Christ, the cornerstone of the church, is Himself both a stone on which the church is built and a stone of stumbling to those who are disobedient and do not believe (vv. 4-8). Peter tells us that God has set Christ as the cornerstone so that He might not only be the cornerstone of the church, but also a stone of stumbling, as prophesied in Psalm 118:22. This, Peter tells us, happened by divine appointment.

The gospel is, therefore, a two-edged sword, both sovereignly calling the elect and sovereignly hardening the hearts of the wicked.

Because Christian witnessing is inseparable from the preaching, witnessing is also a two-edged sword. It will bring conversion to those who believe and will carry them into the church and

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under the preaching of the church. It will also harden those who are disobedient.

In my youth, I worked for the city parks department. One young married man observed that I prayed before eating my lunch. Working together on a project, we had opportunity to discuss the answers to his questions. He was interested and asked many questions. But after a day or two, he became an enemy who never ceased to mock religion, who blasphemed when I prayed before eating and who tried his best to make my life miserable.

We must not be surprised when those to whom we witness, though they asked the question concerning our hope, reject what we tell them and become yet greater enemies of the gospel. This too is God's purpose. It would be a serious and inexcusable mistake to water down the content of our witnessing and try to present it in a more appealing and attractive light, because that would be no witness at all. The power of witnessing does not lie in us, but in God through Christ preached and by means of the irresistible work of the Holy Spirit. We are nothing but tools in God's hand.

With Meekness and Fear

It is for this reason that Peter adds this qualifying phrase: Give an answer to the one who asks you a reason for the hope you have, but do so "with meekness and fear."

To do so with meekness means, negatively, that we do not witness as if we are going to persuade men to believe in Christ. Nor do we witness in order to leave the impression that we are better than those to whom we witness.

Positively, meekness is to know with profound certainty that we are saved by grace alone. We are also sinners as bad as anyone in the world. We did not choose for Christ nor volunteer to follow Him. We were taken out of the world because of the eternal and divine decree of election made before the foundation of the world. We were redeemed on Calvary by the blood of Christ

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who died for us. We were graciously called out of darkness into God's light by an efficacious call which we could not resist. We are saved by sovereign grace. We wish that others could be saved as we are. Hence our willingness to walk a life of obedience and testify to others of the marvellous grace of God.

Fear is not terror, but awe. We are awestruck that God should, out of mere grace, save sinners such as we are. Something of that awe must be communicated to those to whom we witness. We are not boasting of our Christian life; it is of God. We are not urging others to do what we have done to add to the number of souls we have saved. We are not asking for or seeking any credit: it is all of grace. We are simply overwhelmed with the great mercy and love of God, because we are saved by grace. Our motive is the salvation of the church; and, because we do not know who belong to that church and who do not, we desire that those to whom we witness may find the same joy and peace which are our cherished possession.

God must receive the glory in our salvation, in the salvation of those to whom we witness and in the privilege given us of grace to live as pilgrims and strangers in the earth. Then others will see our good works and glorify our Father which is in heaven (Matt. 5:16). Then we will be the light of the world—by grace, through faith alone.

The Manner of Christian Witnessing

David J. Engelsma

For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more. And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; To them that are without law, as without law ... that I might gain them that are without law. To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some (I Cor. 9:19-22).

Introduction

The aspect of Christian witness that we consider in this chapter—the manner of our witness, how we speak the truth to others—is bedevilled by misunderstanding. The misunderstanding hinders the witness.

One common misunderstanding is that the manner is unimportant, so that neither the preacher nor the member needs to be concerned about the manner. All that matters is that we speak the truth; all that is important is *what* is said, not *how* we say it.

However, Scripture emphasizes not only the content, but also the manner of witness. It does this often in the same passages in which it calls us to witness. This is true of the classic passage on witnessing in the New Testament, I Peter 3:15: “be ready always to give an answer ... *with meekness and fear.*” “Meekness

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and fear” describes the manner of our witness, and is as much the command of the apostle as is our readiness to give the right answer to those who ask us.

But there is also another serious misunderstanding of the manner of our witness. It is common in the churches to suppose that Peter’s well-known requirement of “meekness and fear” prohibits the Christian, including the Christian minister or theologian, from ever engaging in hard-hitting controversy with heretics. In the thinking of those who share this misunderstanding, there ought never to be a defence of the faith that uses strong language. There may never be a condemnation of false doctrine and its teachers that is severe. Any such defence of the faith these church members deplore as “unloving,” “harsh,” “unmannerly” and “proud”—as sin against the apostle’s demand for “meekness.” When there is this defence of the faith against heretics and heresies in the preaching or writing, these church members are vocal in their criticism of the preacher or author as an unloving, hard-nosed, if not a hard-hearted, man.

What this misunderstanding overlooks is the abundant revelation by Scripture of witnessing to the truth by the prophets, by the apostles and by Jesus Himself that contradicts what this misunderstanding thinks is the proper manner of witness. The same apostle—Peter—who calls for meekness and fear as the manner of Christian witness says this, in his second epistle, about certain “false teachers” who were troubling the church:

... false teachers among you, who privily ... bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them ... whose judgment now of a long time lingereth not, and their damnation slumbereth not (2:1, 3).

The apostle continues, calling the false teachers “brute beasts” (v. 12), “dog[s] ... turned to [their] own vomit again; and ... sow[s] ... wallowing in the mire” (v. 22).

Many would charge the apostle with being unloving and harsh, guilty of an improper manner of witnessing.

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Evidently, such witness against false teachers is not in conflict with the same apostle's exhortation in I Peter 3:15 concerning meekness and fear.

In this chapter, I explain and exhort the proper manner of witness, as pointed out in I Peter 3:15 and other places in Scripture. It is a mistake to ignore, or even to minimize, the importance of, the right manner—the *how*—of witnessing. A wrong manner of witness can, and often does, hinder, and even spoil, our witness of the truth to others.

But every bit as serious is the misunderstanding that discourages, even damns, the defence of the faith that dares to use strong language and severe condemnation. This attitude actually protects and promotes the lie in the church and thus connives at the loss of the truth of Jesus Christ, so that, in the end, there is no truth for the members to witness. This misunderstanding must not take over in the British Reformed Fellowship or in the Protestant Reformed Churches, as today it does prevail in many churches and in many evangelistic organizations.

Therefore, I begin by exposing this misunderstanding.

A Misunderstanding

Essentially, the misunderstanding about the manner of witnessing consists of this, that the biblical requirement of witnessing with meekness and fear forbids any member of the church, including ministers and theologians, to condemn false teaching and false teachers with strong, severe, uncompromising language. Because we are to speak the truth "in love" (Eph. 4:15), we may never speak the truth in hatred of any false doctrine, no matter how God-dishonouring, or in hatred of any false teacher, no matter how destructive of the gospel. Those ministers who include such condemnation in their witness are judged as lacking a true Christian spirit. Those whose witness is only, always, sweetly positive are regarded as the outstanding apologists of the Christian and Reformed faith.

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This misunderstanding shows itself in certain forms of witness today. One form is the refusal in treating a certain doctrine of Scripture to mention a popular error regarding that doctrine and to condemn it. This was the case with the well-known, popular evangelical, John Stott, in his book on the cross of Christ a few years ago. Stott wrote many good things about the cross. But in all his big book, Stott did not so much as mention the heresy of universal atonement, much less lay out the fundamental issue of the controversy between limited atonement and universal atonement, still much less issue a ringing condemnation of universal atonement, as, for example, the *Canons of Dordt* do in the second head of doctrine.¹

Were one to have asked Stott the reason for this glaring omission, I am sure that he would have said that ignoring this issue was part of a deliberate strategy to witness with meekness and in love. For Stott and his like-minded associates, witnessing in meekness and love demands refraining from polemics, especially sharp polemics consisting of condemning error in strong language.

The same thing happened recently, it has been reliably reported by those who were present, at a highly regarded conference of conservative Presbyterian and Reformed ministers, theologians and laity in western Michigan. The theme of the conference was the gospel of grace. A number of speakers talked about the cross. None addressed the burning, controversial and fundamental is-

¹ John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1986). At one point in his exposition of the cross, Stott indicated his openness to the teaching that the death of Christ fails to accomplish what God desired it to accomplish, namely, the salvation of all for whom God in His love gave His Son. The "authentic love [of God for humans in giving His Son to the death of the cross] is characterised by ... risk-taking with no certainty of success." In the cross, "God's love is 'expended in precarious endeavour, ever poised upon the brink of failure' ... In giving his Son to die for sinners, God made himself vulnerable to the possibility that they would snub him and turn away" (pp. 215-216). Stott was here reflecting on, and in part quoting, the thought of another, but approvingly. If one is determined not to defend a doctrine against attack upon it by its foes, he will inevitably find himself defending the false doctrine opposed to the truth.

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sue of the extent of the cross and its atonement. All carefully spoke only of Christ's merciful death for "lost and guilty sinners," leaving it an open question as far as the conference was concerned whether these "lost and guilty sinners" were only the elect or all men without exception.

The explanation is that the speakers, carefully selected by those in charge, are all committed adherents and diligent practitioners of the mistaken notion that a Christian manner of witness means being only lovingly positive, avoiding severe, condemnatory polemics like the plague. Even their countenances manifest their thinking about witness. One outdoes the other with beatific, sweet smiling. The scowl of a Gomar, of a Calvin, of a Luther—all incomparable witnesses to God and His truth who demolished errors that robbed God of His glory—is anathema to these sickeningly sweet and only-ever-positive witnesses.

Closely related to this form of the misunderstanding of witnessing in meekness and in love is the conviction that the witness must not offend anyone—contra Matthew 15:12-14. Often this form of the misunderstanding serves the interest of a misguided ecumenicity. The Presbyterian and Reformed notables at the conference in western Michigan are all zealous on behalf of uniting evangelicals. But many so-called evangelicals hold to universal atonement. Indeed, a form of universalism is found in supposedly conservative Presbyterian and Reformed churches. Therefore, at a conference of these churches and theologians, the policy is silence on an issue that would be divisive, regardless how fundamental the issue may be. The same ecumenical thinking, no doubt, was Stott's motivation for leaving out of a book that claimed to be a thorough treatment of the cross of Christ the issue, "For whom did Christ die?"

The thinking of those who frown on controversy and who reject sharp, severe condemnation of false doctrine is that we must win everyone. But condemnation drives people away.

This understanding of the manner of Christian witness is *misunderstanding*. It is plainly and incontrovertibly misunderstand-

ing, because it is contradicted by Scripture and by the Christian creeds.

Exposed by Scripture

Scripture reveals that all the great biblical witnesses to the truth engaged in polemics with false teachings and ungodly behaviour—hard-hitting polemics, using harsh words of condemnation, of the doctrines, of the wicked ways of life and of the men who taught and practised them.

This was true of the prophets. An outstanding example is Elijah against the prophets of Baal as recorded in I Kings 18. Elijah employed mockery against these adversaries of the true God and His people. “Elijah mocked them, and said, Cry aloud: for he is a god; either he is talking, or he is pursuing, or he is in a journey, or peradventure he sleepeth, and must be awaked” (v. 27).

The prophets brought a witness of severe condemnation not only to the false teachers, but also to the people themselves, and they did so at the express command of God. The source and real speaker of the severe language was Jehovah God Himself. He told Amos to address the great ladies of Israel as “kine [or cows] of Bashan” and to tell Israel, “I hate, I despise your [worship services]” (4:1; 5:21).

The same was true of the message—the witness—of the apostles. I have already quoted Peter’s searing language about the false teachers in II Peter 2. Paul uses rough language in his condemnation of the teachers of righteousness by man’s own works in Galatians—language that applies to, and which contemporary preachers must apply to, the present-day teachers of the Federal Vision: “let [them] be accursed” (1:8); “I would they were even cut off which trouble you” (5:12), which likely refers to the emasculation of those urging circumcision as a work contributing to justification.²

² For a thorough treatment of the heresy of the Federal Vision in the Re-

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Only with great difficulty can one imagine a sweet smile on the face of James when he said, “Ye adulterers and adulteresses” (4:4), addressing the people entering into friendship with the world, just as the contemporary false doctrine of common grace encourages Reformed church members to hobnob with the world.

Our Lord Jesus, who is designated “the faithful witness” in Revelation 1:5, was harsh in His condemnation of the heretical teachers in Israel in His day. Matthew 23 is one, long, vehement “Woe” upon the scribes and Pharisees who were sitting in the seat of Moses: “hypocrites,” “blind guides,” “blind Pharisee[s],” “whited sepulchres,” “serpents” and “generation of vipers.”

The misunderstanding of the manner of witnessing that outlaws severe condemnation is serious. It condemns the prophets, the apostles and our Lord Himself. It is critical of God, who gave to the prophets, to the apostles and to His Christ these harsh words of condemnation and called them to speak these harsh words. It takes large sections of the Bible away from the church. The minister may not preach these passages of negative, condemnatory witness. The members may not express them against contemporary forms of the errors against which they were originally uttered.

Exposed by the Creeds

The same, strong, severe, condemnatory witness is found in our creeds. This is significant, because the creeds are the speech of, and for, the people—Reformed Christians—whereas one might (mistakenly) say of the scriptural passages that they are exclusively for ministers and theologians.

I choose two instances of severely condemnatory witness from our Reformed confessions. The first is Question 80 of the *Hei-*

formed churches in North America and the threat that this heresy poses to the Reformed faith, see David J. Engelsma, *Federal Vision: Heresy at the Root* (Jenison, MI: RFP, 2012).

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delberg Catechism, which condemns the mass—the very heart of Roman Catholic worship and of the Roman Catholic Church—as a “denial of the one sacrifice and sufferings of Jesus Christ, and an accursed idolatry” (cf. *Westminster Confession* 29:2, 6). This is the witness of every Reformed Christian to Roman Catholics. This witness is *required* of every Reformed Christian, even though giving it will put a severe strain on a sweet smile.

The second instance of a sharply condemnatory witness in the Reformed creeds is the condemnation of Arminian theology, preaching and belief by the *Canons of Dordt*: “[Arminian theology, preaching, and belief] bring again out of hell the Pelagian error” (*Canons* II:R:3). Thus do the *Canons* condemn particularly the Arminian doctrine of universal atonement, the precise heresy that contemporary Presbyterians, Reformed and other purportedly conservative Calvinists have such a difficult time criticizing. But this condemnation by the *Canons* extends to the entire Arminian system of theology: conditional election; a universal love of God and, in this love, a well-meant offer of salvation to all who hear the gospel; salvation dependent upon men’s acceptance of God’s gracious offer or upon baptized children’s performing certain conditions; the possibility that those once saved, whether in the sphere of the covenant or on the mission field, can fall away from Christ, lose their salvation and perish everlastingly.

As a confessional statement, this condemnation too is not optional for Reformed Christians, but mandatory. It is an essential element of the Reformed witness to all who espouse and promote the false gospel of Arminianism.

The very structure of the *Canons of Dordt* exposes the misunderstanding of those Reformed churches and ministers who restrict witness to a positive statement of the truth while looking with suspicion on a negative condemnation of error. The *Canons* include sections of “Rejection of Errors” appended to statements of the truth of salvation by sovereign grace.

I refrain from quoting the negative witness to the truth of Mar-

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tin Luther and John Calvin. He who runs may read their exco-riation of the errors and false teachers of their day.

The Fault of the Misunderstanding

The mistake of the misunderstanding is that it applies to wicked men deliberately and publicly attacking the church's gospel what I Peter 3:15 applies to an interested enquirer. It is one thing that someone, though an unbeliever, asks you to explain your obvious hope. It is quite another thing that an ambassador of Satan assails the foundation of the church, the name of Jesus Christ and the gospel. It is one thing to explain the Christian faith, particularly the resurrection—your "hope"—to a neighbour. It is quite another thing to defend a precious doctrine against a heretic who is corrupting that doctrine and gaining disciples.

It is also a mistake to interpret the demand of Scripture to give an answer with meekness in such a way as to deny another demand of Scripture: "earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3).

It is yet another mistake of the misunderstanding that it urges love for the false teachers at the expense of love for God. In all our witness to the truth, the fundamental motivation must be love for God and His Christ, whom we honour by our witness. All false witness, that is, opposition to the Christian gospel and corruption of the truth of God and Christ, stirs up a holy anger in the child of God, whether minister or member. Out of love for God and His truth, we resist and condemn doctrinal and ethical error.

As if all this were not enough to expose the misunderstanding, the results of the misunderstanding are grievous. Where there is no sharp condemnation of heresy or disobedience to the law, false teaching or a wicked way of life prevails in the churches. In I Corinthians 5:6, Paul warns of a little leaven permeating the whole lump. We see this taking place today in the Presbyterian and Reformed churches in the presence, and then the spread-

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ing, of the heresy of conditional salvation and of justification by faith and works, because of the refusal by the churches and their theologians to condemn the Federal Vision.

The presence of false doctrine is destructive of the churches and their members. As the *Heidelberg Catechism* warns in Question 82, the wrath of God is "kindled against the whole congregation" when false teachers are allowed at the Lord's Supper.

Men and women perish by believing and practising the false doctrines tolerated in the churches because of the misunderstanding that a Christian witness precludes severe condemnation of heresy. Those in the conservative Presbyterian and Reformed churches today who become converts to the gospel of the Federal Vision will appear at the final judgment depending upon their own good works for justification. The judge will condemn them and their sentence will be eternal death. Then the judge will call to account those ministers, theologians and Reformed church members who are responsible for the perishing of these men and women by having failed to condemn the Federal Vision, because they misunderstood the manner of witnessing as forbidding such condemnation.

God saves by the preaching of the "pure doctrine of the gospel." This is the main mark of a true church (*Belgic Confession* 29; *Westminster Confession* 25:4). And this mark is protected by a witness on the part both of the church and of the members that does not suffer from the misunderstanding that a Christian witness is only positive.

The misunderstanding of the manner of witness that I am criticizing really advocates and praises toleration of error, even though those who are guilty of the misunderstanding are shrewd enough to deny it. The inevitable result of refusing, or failing, sharply to condemn errors of doctrine or life is toleration of those errors. But tolerance is not a Christian virtue. Tolerance, as someone has said, is the virtue of those who believe nothing.

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Tolerance is the one quality extolled by our ungodly society today. I fear that some Reformed Christians have been seduced by the world's thinking about tolerance. Perhaps, these professing Christians have also been scared off by the world's reproach of those who are intolerant as "bigots," "extremists" and "radicals."

The implication of the misunderstanding of the manner of witness as ruling out condemnation of error is tolerance. Tolerance is the ruin of a church, the destruction of souls and the profaning of the name of Almighty God.

Whatever the biblical manner of witness may be, it does not, and may not, proscribe, or even water down, a vigorous, intolerant, hard-hitting defence of the faith against all kinds of heresies and against ungodly behaviour.

But then we must still do full justice to the manner of our witness that the Bible requires, for example, in I Peter 3:15 and in I Corinthians 9.

The Importance of the Manner

Here, we take issue with another serious misunderstanding about the manner of witness sometimes found in the church. This misunderstanding supposes that the manner of witnessing is unimportant: "As long as what I say is the truth, my witness is good. All that matters is *what* I say; *how* I say it is of no concern to God or to men." Thus, men have excused their harsh, arrogant witness to unbelievers or to members of other churches than their own. Thus, men have justified their merciless, overbearing speech to another member of their own congregation. Thus, fathers have defended their rough, abusive speech to their own children.

The Bible, perhaps to our surprise, exposes also this misunderstanding. The Bible calls for witnessing but, usually in the same breath, for witnessing in a certain, right, prescribed manner. How we witness is important. This is true, first, with regard to

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the speech of pastors to their congregation. According to I Thessalonians 2:11, the apostle exhorted, comforted and charged the members of the congregation "as a father doth his children."

Second, Scripture admonishes a proper manner of witness regarding persons outside the church: "with meekness and fear" (I Pet. 3:15); "with grace, seasoned with salt" (Col. 4:6).

The right manner is also important with regard to our witnessing to each other in the church. Ephesians 4:29 exhorts, "Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers." Verse 31 adds, concerning the manner of our witness, "Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice."

This prescribed manner is not any lack of confidence concerning the truth or righteousness of what we are saying. Meekness is not weakness. We are all familiar with the witness to some doctrine or way of life who adopts the demeanour of uncertainty concerning his witness: "It seems to me that this doctrine is likely" or "That particular behaviour is probably not the right way to live."

What we witness is God's own truth and we are certain of it. We are confident, therefore, that our witness is true. Nor do we pretend otherwise. What good is an uncertain witness, especially concerning eternal things—things pertaining to everlasting weal or woe?

But the requisite manner is "*meekness*," which is, fundamentally, humility. This humility characterizes not the content of the witness, but the one who bears witness. We do not come across as thinking highly of ourselves, specifically with regard to knowing the truth about which the one to whom we speak is ignorant. Our witness is not characterized by pride. Nor is this meekness affected, a put-on for the occasion. Rather, it is the working out in our witness of that which lives in our hearts. We have this hope that the other lacks and we know the reason

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of the hope for which the other asks, because the Lord God graciously has given to us, spiritually ignorant, damn-worthy sinners in ourselves, the hope and the knowledge of the reason for the hope.

We witness, as we live, or ought to live, all our life: by grace alone, which humbles us and makes us meek. This is what Colossians 4:6 means when it says that our speech is always to be "with grace." The reference is not to our grace, not to our graceful words. But the reference is to the grace of God. We witness with the grace of God, including its government of the manner of our witness.

Then our witnessing speech will also be "seasoned with salt," as Colossians 4:6 adds. Salt makes food tasty, savoury, appealing. When the manner of our witness to the grace of God in Jesus Christ is characterized by the meekness that grace produces, our speech will be savoury, even to the unbeliever. The content does not appeal to the unbeliever, as an unbeliever. Emphatically, it does not; nor may we adulterate the message to make it appealing. But the manner of our speaking does not "turn him off," does not disgust him by arrogance. If he is one of God's elect, even the gracious manner of the witness will be used by God to gain him to Christ.

I think of the *presentation* of a good meal or of the *delivery* of a sound sermon. Presentation and delivery are not the main things, but they are not unimportant.

How appropriate is the meekness that is born of grace! The content of our witness is grace. It is simply right that the manner of the witness be in harmony with the content. How inappropriate that we testify of grace proudly! If the one to whom we witness does not rebuke us for arrogance, then the apostle certainly brings us up short: "For who maketh thee to differ from another? and what hast thou that thou didst not receive? now if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory, as if thou hadst not received it?" (I Cor. 4:7).

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I Peter 3:15 adds another element to the required manner of witness: "fear." This is not fear of the one who asks us a reason of our hope. The immediately preceding verse expresses that we are not "afraid of their terror" or "troubled" (v. 14). But the fear that must characterize the manner of our witness is reverence for God, on whose behalf we witness. We rightly fear, lest we refuse or fail to witness. We properly fear, lest we compromise the witness or corrupt it in any way. But, above all, we are in awe of the great God to whom we witness, and this awe toward Him, with humility regarding ourselves, shows itself in how we witness.

The Causes of a Proper Manner

We take heed to the manner of our witness, because we know that giving the witness in a bad manner, that is, arrogantly, can so spoil the witness that what we say is not even heard. And the witness is precious to us; nothing, least of all our own sinful selves, must get in the way of our witness. This sore evil spoils the instruction that some parents give their children. The manner is so obnoxious that the children disregard the instruction. The manner of the parents is always angry, threatening or demeaning. The same is true sometimes in the church when a member rebukes or corrects his brother or sister. The rebuke or correction accomplishes nothing because of the proud manner in which it was administered.

One cause of the appropriate manner is stated in I Peter 3:15: "But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts." These words come first in the exhortation to witness and to witness in the right way. Sanctifying God is the spiritual activity of devoting ourselves to Him. This is the cause of our readiness to witness. This determines the content of our witness: the reason of our hope. But this will also produce the fitting manner of witness. We obviously are not seeking ourselves and our own glory in the witnessing or in the controversy, but we are seeking the glory of God, whom we sanctify in our hearts. When God is in our hearts, consciously in our hearts, we cannot but be humble and meek.

The Manner of Christian Witnessing

The other cause of the right manner is the powerful desire we should have in our witness, namely, to win the one to whom we witness to Christ. We desire that the one to whom we witness comes to share our hope. Our desire is not to win the argument, but to win the person. Our desire, if God will grant it, is not even simply to establish the truth, victoriously, beyond contradiction, shutting the opponent's mouth, but to establish the truth in the soul of the one to whom we witness, so that also his mouth is opened to confess the truth with us.

Here, I call our attention to I Corinthians 9:19-27. Paul declares that in all his witnessing he made himself servant unto all, that he might gain the more (v. 19). The passage applies, in the first instance, to the apostle and, therefore, to the preacher or missionary. Nevertheless, there is also application to the manner of the witness of all believers. It is also the case that the apostle describes his *behaviour* in witnessing, on account of his burning desire to "gain the more" (v. 19) and "save some" (v. 22). But one's behaviour is an aspect of the manner of witnessing.

The apostle deliberately adjusted his behaviour to the nature of his audience, according to his purpose to be the means of the salvation of some. Among the Jews, he behaved like a Jew. Among the lawless Gentiles, he showed himself lawless ("without law"). His reference is to matters indifferent in themselves, matters that belonged to the Old Testament ceremonial and civil laws. An example was his having his co-worker, Timothy, circumcised for the sake of his work among the Jews (Acts 16:3: "because of the Jews"). Likewise, he observed certain Old Testament festivals (21:17-26). When working among the Gentiles, neither did Paul himself observe the distinctive rites and rituals of the Jews, nor did he impose them on the Gentiles.

Such was the apostle's willingness to adjust the manner of his witnessing in the interests of not needlessly offending those with whom he worked and of gaining them to Christ, that in Corinth he gave up the right to be supported by them, but worked to support himself (I Cor. 9:7-18). It is this sacrifice

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of the apostle that is the context of his assertion that he made himself servant to all that he might “gain the more” (v. 19).

In our witness, whether to an unbeliever or to an erring or weak brother, our purpose must be to gain and save him, if God wills. This will control the manner of our witness. This love for him will manifest itself in how we speak to him.

Such witness—truth in content, meekness and love in manner—God may use to gather and save His own to His glory.

What a motivation to witness!

What a motivation to witness properly!

By the Spirit of the Lord

Herman Hanko

And the angel that talked with me came again, and waked me, as a man that is wakened out of his sleep, And said unto me, What seest thou? And I said, I have looked, and behold a candlestick all of gold, with a bowl upon the top of it, and his seven lamps thereon, and seven pipes to the seven lamps, which are upon the top thereof: And two olive trees by it, one upon the right side of the bowl, and the other upon the left side thereof. So I answered and spake to the angel that talked with me, saying, What are these, my lord? Then the angel that talked with me answered and said unto me, Knowest thou not what these be? And I said, No, my lord. Then he answered and spake unto me, saying, This is the word of the LORD unto Zerubbabel, saying, Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the LORD of hosts (Zech. 4:1-6).

Introduction

Zechariah received this vision after the captives had fulfilled their seventy years in captivity and had come back to the land of Palestine. When they returned, the first item on the agenda was the building of the temple.

The problem was that, although the work was begun, it soon languished and came to a halt. The primary reason for this was that Judah was surrounded by enemies, especially the Samaritans to the north, who threatened Israel with dire threats. These enemies wrote to the king of the Persian Empire to call a halt to the building of the temple and did everything in their power to

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prevent the work from being done. The people lost heart and, under the difficulties they faced in their work, they quit the work altogether. But God sent to them the prophets Haggai and Zechariah to tell them that they must continue the work, that it was essential for their existence that they build the temple.

In order to encourage them and to quiet their fears and their distress, God gave to Zechariah this vision: "Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the LORD of hosts" (v. 6).

The building of the temple, as we learn from the rest of Scripture, is a picture, an Old Testament type, of the gathering of the church in the new dispensation. It is a demonstration of how the Son of God, to use the words of our *Heidelberg Catechism* in Question 54, "gathers ... by His Spirit and Word, out of the whole human race, a church chosen to everlasting life." Therefore, this vision is a word of encouragement and comfort to the saints who are a part of the church in which the work of the gathering of the church is taking place.

Witnessing is most emphatically a part of the work of gathering the church of Christ. Let us remember those stirring, powerful and dramatic words of God which are addressed also to us: "Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the LORD of hosts." That is the rule for the gathering of the church in every age.

The Vision Itself

The vision is a very interesting one and, in some respects, unusual. At the centre of the vision stands the candlestick. The candlestick was one of three pieces of furniture in the Holy Place of the tabernacle and temple: the altar of incense, the table of showbread and the candlestick, which stood on the left side of the altar of incense when one entered. The veil separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place.

In order that it might give its light, the candlestick had to be filled with oil by the priests. It was a candlestick with seven arms. At the top of each arm was a bowl. At the time of the

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evening sacrifice, the priests filled the seven bowls with oil and lit the candlestick. The trouble was that the bowls were not very big and so they could not burn for a very long time. According to I Samuel, the candlestick went out early in the morning. When God called Samuel to his work in the middle of the night, we read that it was just before the light of the candlestick went out (3:3). And so for the greater part of the day, the candlestick did not even burn because the oil ran out. That was significant for this vision as well.

Above that candlestick was a bowl—a golden bowl—which was connected to the seven bowls that were on the top of the arms of the candlestick by seven pipes, so that what was in the bowl could run into the bowls of the candlestick. As long as oil was in the bowl, the bowls on the candlestick were fed and could burn. That bowl, in turn, was connected by two golden pipes to two olive trees, one that stood on the right of the candlestick and another on the left. The result was that the oil of the olives on the olive tree flowed directly into the bowl and from the bowl into the candlestick, so that no priests intervened. The burning of the candlestick was not dependent on the Aaronic priesthood or on the faithfulness of the priests or Levites. It had its supply of oil directly. Furthermore, the supply of oil was continuous. There was no time when the candlestick did not burn.

The force of the vision lies in the fact that the candlestick never went out. To this the text refers when it says, "Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the Lord of hosts."

The candlestick stood in the tabernacle and later in the temple. The tabernacle and the temple were Old Testament types of God dwelling in covenant fellowship with His people. The people came to the temple with their offerings, for God dwelt in the temple in the Shekinah, the cloud of glory that filled the Most Holy Place. By God's dwelling in the midst of His people, He said, "This people is my covenant people in the midst of whom I have chosen to dwell."

We learn from the New Testament that the temple, as a symbol of God's covenant with His people, was fundamentally a sym-

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bol of Christ Himself. That is clear from John 2:21. You recall that in the early ministry of the Lord He cleansed the temple, chased out the animals, overturned the tables of the money changers and drove out those who bought and sold in the temple. The wicked Jews, angry and disconcerted, said to Him, "By what authority do you do this? We have authority here in the temple, not you. What makes you think that you have the right to cleanse this temple of these buyers and sellers?" The answer of the Lord was seemingly somewhat enigmatic: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (v. 19). John tells us that He spoke of the temple of His body, which He would raise up after He died on the cross. The temple was a picture of Christ.

It is important to remember that types in the Old Testament are always imperfect. The type can never be the reality; it is always merely a type. The temple was only a type because in the Old Testament, although God dwelt with His people in covenant fellowship, they still dwelt quite far from each other. They could not come close together. God was in the Most Holy Place while the people were in the Outer Court. There was a veil hiding the Most Holy Place from the rest of the temple. Between God and His people were the Aaronitic priesthood, the altar of burnt offering and the veil.

The lesson was this: One cannot come to God until the blood of atonement has been shed and sin has been paid for, because He is a holy God and no one can approach Him except his sin be taken away. And so believing Israel longed for the coming of the true High Priest, when the veil would be taken down through His perfect sacrifice for sin, for this would mean full fellowship with God.

Christ is the temple of God, first of all, because He is, as the gloriously beautiful *Nicene Creed* expresses it, "true God of true God." In the second place, His body is the church. The result is that, in Christ, God and His people dwell together as close as it is possible to come in covenant fellowship.

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The candlestick was a special symbol of the church in this sense: it depicted the church of all ages, the church of the old and new dispensations, the light that shines in a dark and sinful world. It is to the candlestick that Jesus refers when He said, "Ye are the light of the world" (Matt. 5:14). That is why the old candlestick of the tabernacle could only be a type: it went out daily and it was dependent upon a human priesthood for its burning. Man cannot create a church that is the light of the world. But in the vision, the oil does not come through human intermediaries. It comes directly from the olive trees into the candlestick. And the candlestick never goes out.

The church is that light which shines in this world. That the candlestick refers to the church is clear from Revelation, where the Lord, in the visions to the Apostle John on the island of Patmos, identifies the seven churches of Asia with the seven golden candlesticks: "the seven candlesticks which thou sawest are the seven churches" (1:20).

In the letter to the church at Ephesus (2:1-7), in which He charges it with the grievous sin of leaving its first love, the Lord declares, "You must repent because if you do not repent I will take away your candlestick." The church is depicted in the candlestick as a shining light in the world of darkness.

The question remains: To what does the oil refer? Throughout the entire old dispensation and specifically defined in Zechariah 4:6, the oil refers to the Holy Spirit. When prophets, priests and kings were anointed they were anointed with oil. That oil was a symbol of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit who filled them so that they could fulfil their calling, whether they held the office of prophet or priest or king.

The two olive trees are also defined for the prophet Zechariah, when he asked, "What be these two olive branches which through the two golden pipes empty the golden oil out of themselves?" (v. 12). The angel answered, "These are the two anointed ones, that stand by the Lord of the whole earth" (v. 14). The angel identified those two olive trees as symbols of

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Zerubbabel and Joshua, the two blessed ones. Zerubbabel was really supposed to be the king. He was in the line of David—he had royal blood in his veins, but he could not rule as king because Judah was under the rule of the Medes and Persians. Joshua, on the other hand, was the high priest. Zerubbabel and Joshua, therefore, represent those two offices in Israel which were necessary for Israel to continue to be God's representative or God's ambassador to defend His holiness and His mighty works in this dark and sinful world. But they could not do that work in any significant way. Zerubbabel was, after all, only an earthly claimant to the throne of David. He could not even rule himself so as to deliver himself from the enemy of sin, much less could he rule Israel. And Joshua himself, as is clear in another vision, had such dirty clothes that he could not possibly function as the true priest in Israel (3:3-5). He was a sinful man. How could he bring a sacrifice in the temple that would pave the way for Judah to come to God when he had to make a sacrifice for himself (cf. Heb. 5:1-3)? That was impossible.

And so Zerubbabel and Joshua, by virtue of their offices, were merely typical of Christ. How important this is. There never was a man in the entire old dispensation who could hold the offices of king and priest at the same time—with the one exception of Melchizedek, King of Jerusalem. He was not even a member of God's chosen people but, as Hebrews tells us, he was greater than Abraham (7:7). Abraham brought tithes to Melchizedek (vv. 4-6). He was a unique type of Christ. Once in a while, kings tried to do the work of priests, Saul did and he lost the kingdom as the result of it. Uzziah, a king of Judah, tried and God struck him with leprosy. They might not intrude on each other's offices because no man in all the world could make the perfect sacrifice which would open the way into the presence of God and rule over the church as its head and king.

The Meaning of the Vision

In general, therefore, the meaning of the vision is that our Lord Jesus Christ, the true prophet, priest and king under God, is the

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One who gathers, defends and preserves His church throughout all time. He is able to do this because He purchased the church and earned for it righteousness by His perfect and complete obedience and sacrifice on the cross. He arose with power from the grave and ascended on high where all authority was given to Him in heaven and on earth. He pours out His Spirit on the church and accomplishes the work of gathering His church. He knows where all His sheep are to be found, in every nook and cranny of the world, even before they are converted and added to the church. The Spirit of Christ sent by the Father and by the exalted king and priest takes hold of them, rescues them from this present, evil world, transforms them from totally depraved sinners into saints, guides them through life in preparation for their place in the church in heaven and takes them home when their earthly pilgrimage is over. The Spirit leads them into all truth, regenerates them, sanctifies them, gives them the marvellous power of faith and shields them from all their enemies so that they are never overcome in the terrible battle they are called to fight. Thus the Spirit as the Spirit of Christ gathers the church and builds the real temple of God.

Let us explore this just a little bit. When Christ finished His work on earth as the One who made the perfect sacrifice for sin, He ascended into heaven and sat at God's right hand as prophet, priest and king, in fulfilment of all the Old Testament types. As Peter explains in his marvellous Pentecostal sermon, when Christ was seated at the right hand of God, He received the promise of the Spirit (Acts 2:33). I know the Spirit came upon Him already at the time of His baptism to ordain Him publicly as God's office-bearer in the midst of the world, when all human office-bearers had failed and could never accomplish the will of God. Nevertheless, when He was exalted to the highest heavens, He received, says Peter, the promise of the Spirit. The Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, gave to Christ the Spirit whom Christ poured out upon the church and by whom the temple of the church is built.

The church of Christ is often called the temple of God. In Ephesians 2:20-22, Paul writes,

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[Ye] are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit.

The church, with Christ, is the true temple of God, for the church is Christ's body.

Peter says the same thing in I Peter 2, where he talks about each child of God being a living stone in that temple (v. 5). The false church claims to build the temple of God by might and by power. They cannot do it, because they stumble at the cornerstone by disobediently rejecting Christ, the One upon whom alone the church can be built. Those who attempt to build the house of God by human power do so, because they, having examined the cornerstone, hurl it from them as being worse than useless.

The Word of God to Zerubbabel was "Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the LORD of hosts." And the meaning is "Zerubbabel, you must not be discouraged in building the temple because there are so many enemies and opponents. You must not faint in your calling, because it is not by might and not by power but by my Spirit that the temple will be built."

It is almost as if the voice that talked to Zechariah anticipated an objection on the part of Zerubbabel: "Yes, but we are so small; we are just a few in number and the enemy is strong. How will we succeed in building the temple in the face of such opposition?" Then the Word of the Lord to Zerubbabel was, "For who hath despised the day of small things?" (4:10). God does not work in His church through earthquakes, powerful winds and visible signs and miracles. He works quietly, powerfully, irresistibly and internally by the still, small voice of His Spirit in gathering His church.

The Significance for Us

We in the new dispensation who now are the true candlestick

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of God must take these words to heart. In our day, many think that the church is gathered by might and by power. We must send forth armies of evangelists. We must train them in schools, where they are given intensive training in evangelistic methods. We must have men of charisma, men who can hold audiences. We must even abandon the old traditional ways of worship, because we live in the twenty-first century and the people of this millennium are not moved by the old traditional preaching of the Word. We must have dialogue, not one man only speaking. We must have "active" congregational participation in the worship services. We must have all-night prayer vigils, when the church comes together and prays earnestly and with passion all night long for the revival and renewal of the church. It is the man who can boast of leading many people today to Christ and saving the souls of many who otherwise would go lost, who is hailed as the successful evangelist.

It is easy in the face of all this to throw up one's hands in despair, as Judah did. It is easy to complain about lack of resources, the small number who are concerned, the paucity of labourers, the smallness of the church of Christ that still holds to the truth, the difficulty of a task so monumental in the face of fierce and increasingly bitter opposition. To all these objections comes the Word of God: "For who hath despised the day of small things?" (v. 10). The Spirit of Christ, exalted in heaven, gathers the church. Does He need human might and power?

To all human efforts the text says, "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit," saith Jehovah of hosts. What a powerful word for our modern age. We must remember these words as we talk about the witness of the church, the witness of the Christian and our calling to witness.

Luther understood that truth, even though he was a powerful and courageous preacher. It was while he was enjoying a few moments of relaxation, when others with awe were speaking of the mighty results of Luther's work in all of Europe, that he reminded his colleagues that he had done nothing, but that while he and Amsdorf were drinking their mug of beer in Wittenberg the Word of God had done it all.

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When the radical Anabaptists, thinking Luther was too slow in his reformatory work, created riots, smashed church windows, burned Roman Catholic idols, destroyed painted glass and tried to change the whole church within a week or two, Luther appealed to the power of the Word of God. He demonstrated what he meant by calmly delivering sermons in the church in Wittenberg. In that way, by demonstrating the power of the Word, he chased the radicals from the town and preserved the true reformatory work.

The Spirit works, as Luther demonstrated, through the Word. He works in connection with the Word; He never works without the Word in some mysterious, inexplicable way in the consciousness of men. He binds Himself to the Word and refuses to gather the church apart from the Word. That is how the church is gathered and that is how the temple of God is built.

God is nearly finished with His work of building His church in heaven. Heaven is a very busy place where new saints arrive every day to be incorporated into the temple that is built in glory. The Spirit does the work, the Spirit of the exalted Christ. And the Spirit of the exalted Christ is the only One who can do the work. This is true for several reasons.

In the first place, that temple down to its smallest details was determined by God from all eternity in the decree of election. The Spirit knows the deep things of God (I Cor. 2:10).

In the second place, all the stones in that temple are made from dirty, ugly, useless rocks but are transformed into translucent and gloriously beautiful blocks of marble by the power of the cross of Jesus Christ as the true priest and king, which power is worked by the Spirit of Christ. Christ is the cornerstone and by His work He determines the size, the strength, the character, the beauty and the glory of the temple of God.

In the third place, only the Spirit knows where these elect can be found. You do not know; I do not know. Sometimes in strange places, the Spirit finds the stones which are necessary to build that temple. Once in the house of a whore on the walls of Jeri-

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cho; once among the Canaanites, who were under the curse of Ham's son; once in the camp of Israel's enemy, Moab. These are all in strange places, places we would never think of going. Alleys and ghettos as well as palaces and mansions, but the Spirit is the only One who knows. And He knows because the church is composed of living stones which were determined by God eternally. God in His counsel saw that temple in its perfection and in all of its glory, and each stone in it.

It must be the work of the Spirit, because only the Spirit can make saints out of sinners: people on their knees praying who formerly blasphemed; people who cry out "God be merciful to me a sinner," who were at one time the proud and haughty of the earth, who thought they could walk in their own ways; a thief hanging on a cross who suddenly longed to be in Christ's kingdom; persecutors of the church who became missionaries to the far reaches of the world. Only the Spirit can change them, because, when He calls, Christ calls and His call is irresistible. The Spirit is sent by Christ and is only working out what God has determined to do eternally and what Christ accomplished on the cross of Calvary. Only the Spirit can do that work, because it takes a lifetime of preparation. The unique and particular pathway in life the Lord gives each of us to walk is to shape and fit and form us for our place in the temple of God in heaven. We cannot do that. The Spirit alone knows our place and knows how to prepare us for that place.

We cannot go to heaven too early. The time is not yet come for the stone you are; the wall is not high enough yet. You are a stone that belongs nearer the roof. God determines it all and works it all by His Spirit so that all the pathways of your life and of the life of every child of God are sovereignly determined and sovereignly worked out by the Spirit of the exalted Lord. Only the Spirit knows the time when we should die, when it is time for us to be fitted into the temple in heaven. The Spirit carries us home. Only God through Jesus Christ can build that marvelous temple where Jehovah dwells in covenant fellowship with His people.

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It is all the work of the Spirit. We do not do anything. We do not build that temple. "Not by might, nor by power" is that temple built.

Does that mean we do not have anything to do? Oh no! People who say that emphasis on the sovereignty of God makes men irresponsible do not understand His mighty works. I am near the end of my own calling in the church of Christ after almost sixty years of preaching. We cannot do the work of gathering the church. We represent human power and might. "Not by might, nor by power ..."

But God gives us the privilege of so being caught up in His work that we also work. Our work is earned for us on the cross. It is an indication, and working out, of God's favour and love to us when we are able to work. God does not need us. He does not need you; He does not need me. He does not need my sermons; He does not need my teaching in the seminary. He does not need my books; He does not need anyone or anything. But He gives us the privilege to be instruments in His hands, pens with which He writes, a hammer of the Word with which He builds, because He loves us and because He loves His church.

Ours is a role that we are able to perform only by grace. Only the power of the Spirit in our own hearts enables us to be busy in the service of Christ. And so we are part of the candlestick and the shining light in this world of sin and darkness. We are counted worthy in Christ of the privilege of being busy in His church. What a wonderful privilege!

Do we boast about our accomplishments and what we have done? The words stick in our throats. Not what my hands have done! We labour in the work of God. That is true human responsibility. And that is the incentive that the people of God need to be faithful in their calling, whatever it may be. Why do we labour diligently? Because we accomplish great things? No, but because there is a wonder to God's work that embraces us in our feeble efforts and uses us to do His work. He uses us. But if we are truly to be faithful members, faithful servants and

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faithful witnesses, we must remember it is not by might, not yours or mine, nor by human power, but by Jehovah's Spirit. The temple will be built. Every stone will be saved and fitted in its place. But it is the work of the Spirit when at last we are all in our own places in that glorious temple that is the body of Christ. We will see then with total clarity not what you and I have done, but what God has done for His own glory.

Remember those words: "Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the LORD of hosts." Amen.

The Martyr-Church's Witness to the Ascended Lord

David J. Engelsma

When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth. But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God, And said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God. Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord, And cast him out of the city, and stoned him: and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul. And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep. And Saul was consenting unto his death (Acts 7:54-8:1a).

Introduction

This passage records the first Christian martyrdom. A martyr is one who gives up his life for the sake of his witness to Jesus Christ, one who, as Revelation 12:11 puts it, loves not his life unto the death.

The deacon and evangelist Stephen was the very first of the New Testament people of God so to die. He is called a martyr by the man, Saul, who is spoken of in Acts 8:1 as consenting at the time to Stephen's death. Speaking to Jesus, whom he saw in

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a trance, Saul confessed, "And when the blood of thy martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by, and consenting unto his death" (22:20).

Not only was the incident the murder of Stephen by the enemies of Jesus Christ, but it was also the occasion of the outbreak of persecution against the entire church. Acts 8:1b informs us that "at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles."

The pressure had been building up since soon after Pentecost, beginning with the imprisonment of Peter and John (4:3), after they healed the lame man in the temple. With the stoning of Stephen, the dam burst and the wicked made havoc of the church.

That persecution continues, with periods of respite for the church, down to the very end of time, when the Lord, seen by Stephen at God's right hand, comes back to earth, as He promised. In apostolic times, there was the persecution of the church by the Jewish nation, aided by the local Roman rulers. Herod will kill the Apostle James and imprison Peter, because he knows that this pleases the Jews (12:1-4). Later, the Roman empire will launch persecution, instigated by Emperor Nero, that lasts from about AD 64 until about AD 320.

But, as Scripture predicts and history bears out, the true church is always persecuted. The ongoing persecution will culminate in the "great tribulation" under Antichrist in the not too distant future (Matt. 24:21). Persecution does not always take the form of the imprisonment, torture and death of the members of the church. Hatred, ridicule and reproach are also persecution.

The passage in Acts 7 and 8, therefore, confronts us with the "martyr-church" of Jesus in the world. The church is a persecuted church, a church hated and put to death for Jesus' sake. As the church confesses in Romans 8:36, "For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter."

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This church bears witness to Jesus as the ascended and exalted Lord.

In the passage are two truths that stand out, two truths that are seemingly in stark contrast with each other. Indeed, they appear contradictory. These truths are the martyrdom of Jesus' faithful witness on the one hand, and the lordship of the ascended Jesus on the other hand.

The question begs to be answered: How can Stephen be martyred, if Jesus is Lord? Or, if Jesus is Lord, how can His witness on earth be martyred? This question always rises out of the reproached and persecuted condition of the true church in the world.

That there is no real conflict between the two truths is plain from the fact that Stephen, and like him, the church, although a martyr, witnesses to the lordship of the ascended Jesus. As the stones are crushing his body and taking his life, Stephen witnesses, loudly, "Jesus is Lord."

What the Witness of the Martyr-Church Is

Stephen gave a clear, powerful, explicit witness of the ascension and, therefore, of the exaltation of Jesus. This was not only his personal testimony, but also, and especially, the official testimony of the New Testament church. For Stephen held office in the church. He was both a deacon and an evangelist, that is, a preacher of the gospel. Also, he was empowered to give witness by the Holy Spirit: "full of the Holy Ghost" (Acts 7:55).

The content of his witness was, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God" (v. 56). This was witness to Jesus' glory as the One who had ascended. First, it was testimony that the man, Jesus, is in heaven. Not long before Stephen gave this witness, Jesus was "taken up ... into heaven" (1:11). Stephen testified that Jesus is in heaven, where the glory of God is manifested and where are the spirits of the dead who fall asleep in Jesus. Jesus is there as a man, in His human nature, body and soul. Stephen saw Jesus

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there and calls Him "the Son of man" (7:56). Implied is the confession of Jesus' resurrection. His body is not in the grave but in heaven.

The content of Stephen's witness was also the glory of Jesus as ascended into heaven. For in heaven He is "on the right hand of God" (vv. 55-56). To that exalted position Jesus ascended forty days after His resurrection. This was Jesus' own description to the Sanhedrin of His future ascension: "I say unto you, Hereafter shall ye see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven" (Matt. 26:64).

As the reward for Jesus' obedience to God, in redeeming the elect church by His death, God greatly exalted and highly honoured His Son by giving Him this position in heaven. At the right hand of the Triune God, Jesus shares the awesome glory of God and exercises the infinite power of God in heaven and on earth.

This was the ascension!

It is no wonder, then, that the redeemed church witnesses to the ascension of Jesus as an outstanding element of her witness to Jesus Christ.

In essence, the witness of Stephen was the lordship of Jesus. Jesus' lordship is implied in the statement that Jesus is on God's right hand. His being on the right hand of God is a figurative way of declaring that Jesus rules for God over all creation. What a lordship this is!

But Stephen expressed Jesus' lordship also when he ascribed to Him the title "Son of man" (Acts 7:56). Well did his Jewish audience understand the lordship that Stephen ascribed to the detested Jesus by this title. This was the title that the prophet Daniel gave to the Messiah in Daniel 7:13-14 in the prophecy of the four beasts out of the sea:

I saw in the night visions, and, behold, one like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and

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came to the Ancient of days, and they brought him near before him. And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him: his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed.

Stephen witnessed that Jesus is the Messiah.

He witnessed that Jesus is Messiah triumphant, having come to the Ancient of days and having already received dominion, glory and a kingdom.

Through Stephen at that time and down the ages to the present, the church testifies that Jesus is reigning as king, until He puts all enemies under His feet (I Cor. 15:25).

Stephen stated the lordship of Jesus explicitly. Twice, he called upon Jesus as "Lord" in the hearing of his enemies (Acts 7:59-60). In so doing, he attributed to Jesus an awesome lordship. First, the very fact that Stephen called upon Jesus, that is, prayed to Jesus, proves that, personally, the lordship of Jesus is the lordship of deity. Jesus is God the Lord. He is the Lord Jehovah, to whom alone prayer may be made. I note here that the translators of the Authorized Version were mistaken when they inserted the word "God" into the text in verse 59. The text is teaching that Stephen called upon the Lord Jesus.

Before Jesus, in worship of Him as God in the flesh, Stephen "kneeled" as he was dying (v. 60).

The lordship of Jesus is awesome also in that He is judge over all flesh, as the request of Stephen in verse 60 acknowledges: "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge."

A third aspect of His awesome lordship is His authority and power over death and the grave, as is implied in the request of verse 59: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."

Such is the witness of the church in all her proclamation and

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confession. She witnesses to Jesus not only as the crucified One but also as the ascended One, and she witnesses to the cross as illumined by the ascension.

This is always the witness, seemingly strangely, of a *martyr-church*.

The Witness of a Martyr-Church

The contrast could not be greater or starker: the glorious Lord in heaven being witnessed to by a humiliated church on earth; the triumphant King being witnessed to by a seemingly defeated witness in the world; One on the right hand of God being confessed as Lord by one being stoned outside the city.

Stephen was a martyr. His witness was rejected; he himself was hated ("they gnashed on him with their teeth," v. 54); and he was killed.

The martyrdom of Stephen was the act of official rejection and condemnation by Israel who claimed to be the kingdom and people of God. Stephen had been on trial before the Sanhedrin—the "council" (6:12, 15). Those were judicial proceedings by the ecclesiastical authorities of that time. Although their behaviour was scandalous for a religious court, they carried out the letter of the law of God upon Stephen. They cast him out of the city. They stoned him, the prescribed punishment of a blasphemer. The witnesses who had testified against him cast the first stones.

This is always the experience of the true church. She is hated and despised. Her message is rejected as blasphemy. She is condemned and excommunicated by that which has the name of church among men.

What a contrast!

What an incongruity!

What an apparent contradiction!

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If Jesus is the Lord, His church should not be a martyr-church, but a lordly church. She should not be killed, but she should be doing the killing of her foes.

If, as is the case, the church is a martyr-church, can Jesus truly be the Lord? Does not the martyrdom of the church disprove the witness that He is Lord? Is not the martyrdom of the church the defeat of Jesus by His enemies?

How can these two truths be reconciled: the exaltation of Jesus as Lord by His ascension into heaven, and a martyr-church in the world?

What Accounts for the Witness by the Martyr-Church

Let every Christian and, particularly, every Reformed Christian mark well that the exaltation of Jesus does not mean the earthly popularity, triumph and dominion of the church in the world. Christ is ascended, and the church is a martyr. Christ is Lord in heaven, and the church is under the cross. Christ is at God's right hand, and the faithful witness perishes under the stones of ecclesiastical censures with the backing of the state.

Membership in a true church and faithful confession of the lordship of Jesus do not mean praise and power on earth.

Never in history does the lordship of Jesus translate into earthly dominion for the church.

The church is martyr-church, exactly because she confesses the lordship of Jesus. It is exactly this witness that brings down the stones upon her head, not from the world only, indeed not from the world mainly, but also, and especially, from the apostate church. The unfaithful church hates Jesus, hates Him as Lord. It hates the confessing church, because of her witness to the lordship of Jesus.

The apostate church hates the witness to Jesus of the true church, because this witness includes condemnation of the false church. To the witness of Stephen belonged the sharp words of

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Acts 7:51-52: "Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost," etc.

In addition, the false church hates the positive confession of Jesus as Lord. When Stephen said, "I see ... the Son of man standing on the right hand of God" (v. 56), the ecclesiastical and spiritual authorities sitting on the council "cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord" to kill him (v. 57).

There is one way, and one way only, to avoid martyrdom: mute one's confession of the lordship of Jesus Christ. But this would be to deny Jesus. The alternatives are two: either we witness, or we deny; if we witness, we suffer martyrdom, and if we deny, we find ourselves helping to put the faithful witness to death.

If this explains the martyrdom of the church, it does not yet explain the deepest puzzle: How can the ascended Lord permit His church to be a martyr-church? What accounts for this seemingly contradictory state of affairs?

The Martyr-Church as the Will of the Lord

The explanation of the apparent incongruity is that the Lord Jesus wills that the church witness to His lordship.

Stephen saw what actually is the case in heaven: Jesus is on the right hand of God as Lord. What Stephen saw was not a vision. But Stephen was privileged to receive a glimpse into heaven: "he ... looked up stedfastly into heaven" (v. 55). He saw what all the saints will see in the day of Christ. He saw the lordship of Jesus. This was why Stephen had no problem with the lordship of Jesus, even as the stones of rejection, excommunication and death were falling on him.

As Lord, Jesus *causes* His church to witness to Him. This He does, as He did for Stephen, by the Holy Ghost: "he, being full of the Holy Ghost," witnessed to the lordship of Jesus (v. 55).

By this witness, Jesus convicts and hardens His reprobate en-

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emies. Even in the spiritual hardening of the wicked by the witness of His church, Jesus is Lord. Ultimately, the explanation of the effect of Stephen's witness upon the wicked men who were moved to kill him, that "they were cut to the heart," is the lordly hardening of them by Jesus (v. 54).

Then, He witnesses to Himself *by* the suffering of His martyr-church. Martyrdom is the supreme witness, the clinching witness. In the Greek of the New Testament, the word translated "witness" is literally "*martyr*." As the first Christian martyr, Stephen was the first supreme Christian witness.

Martyrdom is not only the result of witness. Martyrdom itself *is* witness.

The most powerful, compelling testimony to Jesus' lordship is that the church willingly undergoes persecution for Him; that the Christian suffers loss for His sake; that believers gladly give up their life because of their confession of Him.

The witness of martyrdom, Christ uses for the strengthening of the saints, for the spread of the gospel and for the growth of the church. The spread of the gospel and the growth of the church were the effect of the martyrdom of Stephen. Stephen's martyrdom unleashed persecution on the entire church in Jerusalem. The result was that the saints "were all scattered abroad" (8:1). And "they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word" (v. 4).

The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.

There is, therefore, no contradiction of the lordship of Jesus by the martyr-condition of the church in the world.

The Manner of the Church's Witness

Stephen gave witness to the Lord Jesus without personal malice. Unjustly condemned, dreadfully shamed and cruelly killed as a young man, he desired the spiritual welfare of his enemies and prayed for it: "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge" (7:60).

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In this amazing attitude and moving petition, Stephen showed himself personally to be in subjection to the lordship of Jesus, whose lordship he was confessing. Did not Jesus command His disciples, "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you" (Matt. 5:44)?

Christ Jesus answered the petition of His faithful witness in the later conversion of at least one of Stephen's persecutors, the man Saul, who "was consenting unto his [i.e., Stephen's] death" (Acts 8:1) and participating in killing Stephen by keeping "the raiment of them that slew him" (22:20; cf. 7:58). This Saul, later called Paul, would become not only a Christian but also the most energetic and effective witness to Jesus and His lordship the church has ever had.

The church that witnesses to Jesus by her confession must demonstrate submission herself to the lordship of Jesus by all her obedient conduct.

It also belonged to the witness of Stephen that he gave it in confidence of the Lord's present help and final deliverance of him. That is, there was not in those circumstances of martyrdom the slightest doubt of the lordship of Jesus with regard to the witness himself personally.

Regarding present help, Stephen said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God" (v. 56). Not only is Jesus on the right hand of God, but He is "*standing*" on the right hand of God. This is a striking detail of the event. Only here in the Bible do we read of Jesus "*standing*" on God's right hand. Elsewhere, we read that He *sits* at the right hand. With regard to the killing of His witness, with regard to the martyrdom of His church, Jesus rises from His throne, signalling His extraordinary attention to this event in history and indicating His special help to His servant and to His church in these trials. What happens in martyrdom is of the greatest importance to the Lord. Undoubtedly, this is the most important happening of all of the events in history. And stand-

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ing, the Lord will, by an extraordinary effusion of His Spirit and grace, sustain His suffering servant, so that, courageously, he makes a good confession and endures to the end.

In all their suffering of persecution for the sake of their witness to the Lord Jesus, the office-bearers and the members of the church must see Jesus *standing* on the right hand of God for them.

Regarding final deliverance, Stephen said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" (v. 59), and died, consciously, by falling asleep (v. 60). As Lord, Jesus will deliver Stephen from death not by sparing him death, but by taking his spirit to Himself in heaven at the moment of death and, as is assured by Jesus' own resurrection and as is guaranteed by the reception of Stephen's spirit, by raising his body in the day of Christ. The spirit goes immediately to eternal life and glory. In the body, the martyr sleeps in hope of waking on the last day.

As she makes the supreme witness to the lordship of Jesus, the martyr-church is herself assured of, and assured by, the lordship of Jesus. Amen.

Mission Work: Message and Methods

Martyn McGeown

And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen (Matt. 28:18-20).

Introduction

D. L. Moody was once criticized: "Sir, I do not approve of your way of doing evangelism." Moody responded, "I agree with you. I don't like my way of doing it either. Tell me, how do *you* do evangelism?" The critic responded, "I do not do evangelism." Whereupon Moody retorted, "I prefer *my* way of doing evangelism to your way of *not* doing it!" That may sound like a great quote, but remember, first, that Moody was an Arminian revivalist lay preacher (contra *Westminster Larger Catechism*, Q. & A., 158) and, second, that the method of doing God's work is as important as the message. In fact, Moody's quote is similar to the Jesuits' motto: "The end justifies the means."

As Christians, we must not be misled by emotional arguments or influenced by pragmatism. Pragmatism is the idea that, if a method works, that is sufficient justification for using it. We do not ask, "What works? What gets the best results?" but "What

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would God have us do?" The place we look for that answer is God's Word, the Bible.

What does a "missionary-pastor" working with the Limerick Reformed Fellowship do? If people observed my work, would it fit their preconceptions of what a missionary does or is expected to do? They might conclude (especially if they have the typical idea of mission work) that I do almost no missionary work and I am almost exclusively a pastor.

If your idea of a missionary in Limerick is of a man who stands on a street corner in Limerick city centre preaching to passers-by or who hands out gospel tracts door to door, you might possibly conclude that Rev. McGeown is not a missionary. Protestant Reformed missionaries have not traditionally done those things and nor do I do those things in Limerick. In fact, I spend most of my time in my study, making sermons, preparing Bible studies and catechism classes, writing articles and reading. Is that what a missionary is supposed to do?

To answer that question, we will not seek wisdom from D. L. Moody or Billy Graham or some other "missionary expert." We will examine what the biblical pattern is, especially as that is outlined in the book of Acts. The book of Acts was written to show us how the Lord gathered His church, especially through the mission labours of the apostles, in particular the labours of the Apostle Paul. In the book of Acts, then, we derive principles for how we should do mission work today. In this article, we will examine the main principles and apply these to the work of the Limerick Reformed Fellowship.

Let us ask and answer five questions.

1. Who Should Do Mission Work?

Do not be too hasty to conclude that all Christians are missionaries. What does the Word of God teach? Before we turn to Acts itself, we look at the Great Commission:

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Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you ... (Matt. 28:19-20).

Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature (Mark 16:15).

Many believe that the Great Commission is addressed to all believers but that is a mistake. The context makes clear that the commission of our Lord comes to the apostles or the "eleven" (Matt. 28:16; Mark 16:14). Moreover, the Great Commission involves three main activities. First, make disciples; second, baptize; and, third, teach those whom you have discipled and baptized. It is very significant, therefore, that the command is to preach (which is the official proclamation of God's Word, not personal witnessing) and that the command includes the administration of the sacraments. All of this, as we shall see, implies an instituted church and church membership. If all believers are called to preach in terms of the Great Commission, all believers are also called to baptize, but clearly only office-bearers baptize in the New Testament. The only seeming exceptions to that rule are Philip and Ananias (Acts 8:38; 9:18), but Philip was an evangelist (21:8) and Ananias was a prophet (9:10-18). Therefore, we can conclude from the Great Commission that, while all believers are witnesses, not all believers are preachers or missionaries.

A missionary is one who is sent, not someone who goes without being sent. Missionary work (unlike witnessing) is restricted to men who are sent by Christ, the One who has all power in heaven and in earth (Matt. 28:18). Christ calls the church institute to fulfil the Great Commission by sending missionaries, by which sending all Christians fulfil the Great Commission, even if they themselves do not go and are not sent.

This was true of Paul himself, who, although directly called by Christ, when he did mission work deliberately placed himself

under the oversight and care of the local congregation at Antioch. According to Acts 13:1-4, the Holy Spirit chose Paul and Barnabas, and He commanded the church in Antioch to lay hands on them and to send them forth. The church in Antioch sent Paul and Barnabas with their blessing, prayers and support; and Paul submitted to their oversight (14:26-28; 18:22-23). Paul, then, was no independent, freelance, lone-ranger missionary who despised the church. We conclude that the church is the only institute authorized by God to send missionaries today. Mission boards, para-church organizations and other bodies do not send missionaries. The church does. Romans 10:15 still applies: "how shall they preach, except they be sent?"

The Consistory of the Covenant Protestant Reformed Church (CPRC) in Ballymena, Northern Ireland, laid hands on me and sent me. Therefore, I am accountable to them. That church supports me, prays for me and advises me, and to that church I send reports. This, of course, does not mean that the members have no role to play. They do the work of missions *through* the missionary; when the missionary preaches, the church preaches; and the members of the Limerick Reformed Fellowship are called to support the missionary and to bring others to hear his preaching. In summary, the calling of the members is to promote the preaching by life and speech, while the calling of the missionary is to preach, teach and baptize.

2. With Whom Did the Apostles Begin Their Mission Work?

We might imagine that the apostles did the work of missions in a haphazard fashion, but in truth they had a definite methodology, one we do well to follow. They began with the Jews, those familiar with the truth, or with those who were interested in hearing more about the message which they preached. That is where they began, but that is not where they ended. The principle was "to the Jew first, and also to the Greek" (Rom. 1:16; cf. Acts 3:26). Christ commanded this approach in Acts 1:8:

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But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.

Notice also that these words (like the Great Commission) were spoken to the apostles (v. 2). "Begin with Jerusalem and Judaea, where the Jews especially are," Christ commanded.

Invariably, Paul began in the synagogue (13:5, 14-16; 14:1; 17:1-3, 10, 17) or where the devout worshipped God (16:13). There were good reasons for this. This was where people who believed in God were gathered; these were the ones who were expecting the Messiah to come; they were already acquainted with the Scriptures; and there Paul had a natural platform to speak. This was a natural place to start rather than with out-right pagans. Moreover, the apostles began their preaching where they were invited to speak (13:7). In addition, Paul the missionary did not restrict his preaching to where the gospel was completely unknown. Part of his work was to establish the churches in the faith (15:36, 41; 18:23).

This has been our method in Limerick, and this explains the formation of the Limerick Reformed Fellowship. We did not begin with Jews in the synagogue but with the modern equivalent: interested parties with some knowledge of Christianity and the Reformed faith.

In 2004, some individuals in Limerick contacted Rev. Angus Stewart, the pastor of the CPRC. They had come across the monthly *Covenant Reformed News*, they started listening to tapes of the CPRC services and they wanted to learn more. Prof. Hanko was in Ireland at the time and he agreed to speak to them. These individuals did what Cornelius did in Acts 10:24: "Cornelius waited for them, and had called together his kinsmen and near friends." Prof. Hanko advised Rev. Stewart to visit as soon as possible to investigate the field. Rev. Stewart travelled to Limerick to give lectures every six weeks or so from 2004-2010.

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As always, there was a mixed response. Some of the people were offended at the faithful, antithetical, Reformed message. Some remained and others joined. Very slowly a group was formed there calling themselves the Limerick Reformed Fellowship. They chose that name, as opposed to the Limerick *Protestant* Reformed Fellowship, because the term Protestant has negative associations in the Republic of Ireland. For many years, these saints met in homes to listen to tapes, then CDs and then DVDs of sermons supplied by the CPRC. Subsequently, they rented a hall and established a steering committee in the hope of one day having a missionary.

Finally in 2010, after thorough seminary training, I was sent by the CPRC. Now they have regular preaching, catechism classes, doctrinal classes and a Bible study, as well as occasional public lectures.

In summary, we began as the apostles often did, with a group who asked for help. I minister to the Limerick Reformed Fellowship, build up the members and equip them to be witnesses by their godly walk and speech. This is the principle of the "Macedonian Call:" "Come over and help us" (16:9-10). This is not the only way, but it the wisest way given our limited resources and manpower.

3. What Was the Central Means That the Apostles Used in Their Mission Work?

The answer is very simple: Paul and all the apostles preached.

Biblical missions must be a preaching ministry. Paul preached in a world very different from ours but there are many similarities. There was much social inequality: slavery, crime, poverty, injustice, sexual deviancy and even a form of abortion. Paul did not attend, organize or encourage Christians to go on, protest marches to bring about the end of slavery, abortion or prostitution. He did not picket idolatrous places of worship with insulting signs. Paul did not adopt a program of "urban renewal." He preached.

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Paul preached in a very simple way: there was no fanfare, there were no theatrics, there was no band and there was no troupe of actors (although drama was a popular medium with the Greeks). He did not use the media of sport, entertainment or other programs to attract people. Paul opened the Word of God and declared the gospel (I Cor. 2:4-5; Gal. 3:1-2; I Thess. 2:9-13). Paul's preaching was thoroughly biblical: it consisted of the message of the cross and resurrection of Christ, and Paul reasoned with people out of the Scriptures (Acts 13:38-39; 17:2-3, 17). Even miracles were subservient and secondary to the preaching.

The book of Acts gives us several examples of sermons by the apostles. The apostles did not give the modern "potted gospel" of much of evangelicalism. There was no "God loves you; Christ died for you; God has a wonderful plan for your life; God wants to save you." The apostles did not call people to recite the sinner's prayer or to follow four spiritual laws. Paul and the other apostles preached the gospel of Christ's death and resurrection, and called all to repent and believe.

Moreover, apostolic sermons were not shallow. The apostles preached the full counsel of God (20:27); they explained the cross and resurrection as the fulfilment of prophecy; they spoke about creation, providence and the sovereignty of God. There was not a studied avoidance of certain doctrines, such as predestination, and there were warnings against unbelief (13:38-41). This was very counter-cultural. In fact, there could be no message more offensive than the gospel of Christ crucified, and yet that gospel is "the power of God unto [the] salvation" of Christ's church (Rom. 1:16; I Cor. 1:23-24).

Paul also did not spend his time helping the poor. He was not burdened over social problems in the Roman empire. The poor he was eager to assist were the poor of the churches. For these poor, Paul organized collections of alms. We must not get the impression that the Christian church in Acts abandoned the Word of God to serve the poor or, as one trendy "church" in Limerick puts it, "to serve the city." The church had neither the

time nor the resources to do that—and there were more important things to do. This, of course, does not mean that Christians should not help the poor or that Christians should only help the Christian poor—although that should be their priority (Gal. 6:10) through the diaconate—but it does mean that the modern “social gospel” is unbiblical and not apostolic in message or methods.

In the Limerick Reformed Fellowship, we preach twice every Lord’s Day, and we preach everything the Bible teaches, even the difficult and unpopular parts. We will not leave out certain things because they are too deep. There is nothing too deep, if it is explained in simple language. We have had people leave not because things are too deep, but because they are too clear and too sharp. We have young people in the congregation who do not think the preaching is too deep. People who think the preaching is too deep usually want an excuse not to listen to God’s Word.

4. Where Did the Apostles Preach in Their Mission Work?

Some who read the New Testament have the impression that the apostles preached in the open air and, therefore, the church should “take to the streets.” But the apostles normally preached in synagogues, in people’s homes or in rented buildings, such as the school of Tyrannus in Acts 19:9.

Christ and the apostles also preached to crowds in the open air: in the fields, on mountains, in the market places and the Areopagus in Athens. But we should notice two things about this. First, these were natural places of discussion and disputation in that day. People went to the market place to engage in theological and philosophical discussion. Today, people go to the market place simply to shop. Second, Christ and the apostles preached to *people who had gathered to hear what they had to say* (Matt. 5:1; Luke 8:4; 12:1; Acts 2:6, 14; 3:11-12).

We should compare that to modern “street preaching.” There are some men who stand on street corners and “preach.” Such

men do not have a crowd gathered to hear them. Most people simply walk by and they might hear just snippets of what is said. Some have criticized the Limerick Reformed Fellowship because we do not do that. But I do not see much value in that method. Some might disagree with my assessment, but they ought not condemn us if we do not choose to use a method that is not explicitly commanded in the Word of God.

A sermon is the development of the theological concepts of a text of Scripture explained and applied to the congregation. How can you preach a sermon in a modern "open air" setting? The people are not listening; it is not a natural forum for discussion, debate or proclamation. How can one develop the concepts of a text in that atmosphere? Therefore, what a street preacher is forced to do is often little more than to repeat the same thing over and over again in different words. But, if the people to whom you preach are ignorant of the most basic concepts of Christianity, your preaching in the "open air" will not give them sufficient information about Christ.

Others suggest door-to-door work by appealing to Acts 20:20 but that was surely house visitation of the church members or it was a reference to the fact that the church met in homes. The Bible does not command us to go knocking on doors and interrupting people who are not at all interested in church, and the majority of pamphlets which are pushed through letter boxes by church members sadly end up in the bin.

5. What Was the Goal of the Apostles in Their Mission Work?

The goal of the apostles was not simply to "get people saved." For the apostles, preaching and mission work had the goal of glorifying God through the proclamation of His truth and the establishment of faithful churches of believers and their seed. It was simply unthinkable for the apostles that someone would be called to repentance and faith but not join the church. He or she was baptized (with his household) and was added to the church (2:47). It was also not good enough to bring a person to

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saving faith. That person had to be instructed and, today, after two thousand years of the development of doctrine, that takes time (Matt. 28:20). To become a member of a Reformed church today requires thorough instruction in the doctrines of the faith, the Reformed confessions and the Christian way of life.

The problem with much contemporary evangelism is that it produces ignorant and, therefore, weak Christians. In fact, ignorance is encouraged. The more a Christian knows, the more he is a threat to the church authorities. Consequently, the teaching is as shallow as possible and as general as possible. There is also a problem that many leaders in evangelical churches are not theologically trained. Their ability to exegete and expound the Scriptures is limited. The result is baby Christians fed endlessly on watered-down milk (Heb. 5:11-14).

Ignorance is detrimental to the church (Hos. 4:6). Without solid instruction, spiritual growth is stunted. The young people, especially, will often leave, because when the church has exhausted its abilities to entertain—and she cannot compete with the world in this—they will look for meaning elsewhere. That is why we in the Limerick Reformed Fellowship teach catechism (Bible history and doctrine) to our members and to anyone else who is interested.

Outreach and Ideas for the Future

Apart from the Lord's Day services, Bible study and catechism classes (to which we invite others), we have sought to reach out to people in the area. The difficulty in mission work is to make and keep new contacts. We issue a caution. Mission work is not a numbers game. Apart from the thousands converted in Jerusalem (Acts 2:41; 4:4), we have no way of knowing how large the churches established by the apostles were. Did Corinth, Ephesus and Thessalonica have "mega churches" with thousands of members? We do not know but I doubt it.

We have public lectures. While lectures are good, the problem is that there is little interest. The same is true in other church-

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es. In my experience in attending lectures, the majority of the audience are our own Reformed members. Very few outsiders come. This is not a criticism, but something we must consider. If the purpose of our lectures is to build up our own people and equip them to be “ready always to give an answer” (I Pet. 3:15), they are certainly worthwhile. Many fine lectures have been rewritten as pamphlets and the lectures continue to be a witness on-line. Many more listen afterwards than those originally in attendance. There are ways of encouraging people to come. Advertising is expensive. Word of mouth and personal invitation are better, and these require prayer and persistence on the part of the members. If every person who came to a lecture brought one outsider, the value of the lecture would be greatly enhanced.

Another witness is our website. If possible, every modern church and fellowship should have a good, clear, informative, attractive website. We upload our sermons both in audio and video format to our website. I would encourage you to look at our website (www.limerickreformed.com). You can read and/or listen to all our sermons, catechism classes (written outlines), *Canons of Dordt* classes, blog posts and articles. We also have live audio streaming of our worship services, and we have some listeners every week. A website is important because people will often check out a website before they are comfortable enough to visit a church in person.

Another thing we must do is provide simpler materials for unbelievers. The Limerick Reformed Fellowship has excellent pamphlets but in my humble opinion they are not all suitable for evangelizing the unconverted. Many of them are too difficult because they require a basic knowledge of Christianity which most people in our decadent age do not have. We tend to underestimate the appalling biblical illiteracy of people. The easiest pamphlets we have are two by Rev. Steven Houck, “Knowing the True God” and “Jehovah the Saviour,” plus several evangelistic tracts. Therefore, we must work harder to make our own pamphlets or additional short tracts. What is required

is a short gospel presentation which does not consist of a trite “four spiritual laws,” but which is not so deep that the people will not be able to understand, and not too long to be off-putting. In addition, and even more difficult, we need to find ways to get these materials into the hands of unbelievers.

What Challenges and Difficulties Have We Encountered?

First, there is prejudice, mainly from the evangelical groups in the city. The Roman Catholics have showed almost zero interest in our presence in the city. The evangelical groups believe that we are narrow, bigoted, intolerant and divisive. They are opposed to our creeds, the *Three Forms of Unity* (the *Heidelberg Catechism*, the *Belgic Confession* and the *Canons of Dordt*)—which they refer to pejoratively as “man-made documents” or “that pink book”—and they think we are unspiritual, that our worship is dead and that we do not evangelize. These barriers can only be demolished by God’s grace through education, meeting such and showing them that they have been misinformed about us.

Second, there is the issue of Lord’s Day observance, which among evangelicals is virtually unheard-of in the Republic of Ireland. Many churches have only one church service. Working and recreation by church members on Sundays are normal. We are legalists in their view—and we have even lost members because of our faithfulness to the fourth commandment. This struggle is not unique to Ireland; other missionaries experience similar challenges.

Third, we have a lack of resources. By this, I do not mean money but people. A small group with young families does not have much possibility for literature distribution, open-air work, door-to-door evangelism and other projects. This is not a complaint, but we do need to be realistic about what we can do with the numbers we have.

Fourth, we also have fewer opportunities than those labouring in some other areas—there are few shows at which we could set

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up a booth; no invitations for the pastor to speak in churches or schools; no local radio with religious broadcasting and no opportunities to write in the local newspaper. That might change, as we become more established in the city, and we are looking for such opportunities.

But we do not despair. In fact, my years in Limerick have been very encouraging. We have an excellent, enthusiastic core group which is a pleasure for any pastor. We have had disappointments too. Every mission work must expect that. If I believed that my calling was to win the city of Limerick to Christ, I would despair. But that is not my calling. My calling and the calling of the Limerick Reformed Fellowship is to be faithful, to use wisely the resources we have and to pray for God's blessing. We have the chief means of grace, the preaching of the gospel; we have the sacrament of baptism; and we have the prayerful, loving, enthusiastic support of the Covenant Protestant Reformed Church, the Protestant Reformed Churches and many others around the world. Christ gathers His church, and He is pleased to use us as instruments in His hand.

About the British Reformed Fellowship

The British Reformed Fellowship (BRF) was founded in 1990 by a group of Reformed Christians set for the defence of the historic Reformed faith in the British Isles. Its doctrinal basis is "the inspired, infallible, inerrant Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as summarized and systematized in the Reformed confessions, specifically the *Three Forms of Unity* and the *Westminster Standards*."

The BRF produces a biblical and theological journal, the *British Reformed Journal (BRJ)*, four times a year or as frequently as possible. Subscription rates, as of 2014, are £10 (UK, Europe & elsewhere) or \$20US (N. America) for four issues of the *BRJ*. Membership in the BRF, which includes receiving four issues of the *BRJ*, costs the same as subscription to the *BRJ* and is available to Reformed Christians in the British Isles and Europe who agree with its doctrinal basis. New subscribers and members are welcome.

The BRF holds biennial family conferences at various locations in the British Isles for a week in the summer, usually in the beginning of August. Previous conference themes include Marriage and the Family, The Covenant of Grace, Sovereign Grace, The Church, The Last Things, The Kingdom of God, Assurance, Keeping God's Covenant, The Five Points of Calvinism, The Work of the Holy Spirit, The Word of God for Our Generation and (of course) Ye Are My Witnesses. Why not consider joining us for a relaxing week's fellowship around God's Word?

Appendix: About the British Reformed Fellowship

The BRF website (www.britishreformed.org) contains articles from the *BRJ*, as well as information on BRF conferences, free audios, contact details and other materials. So look us up on the web!